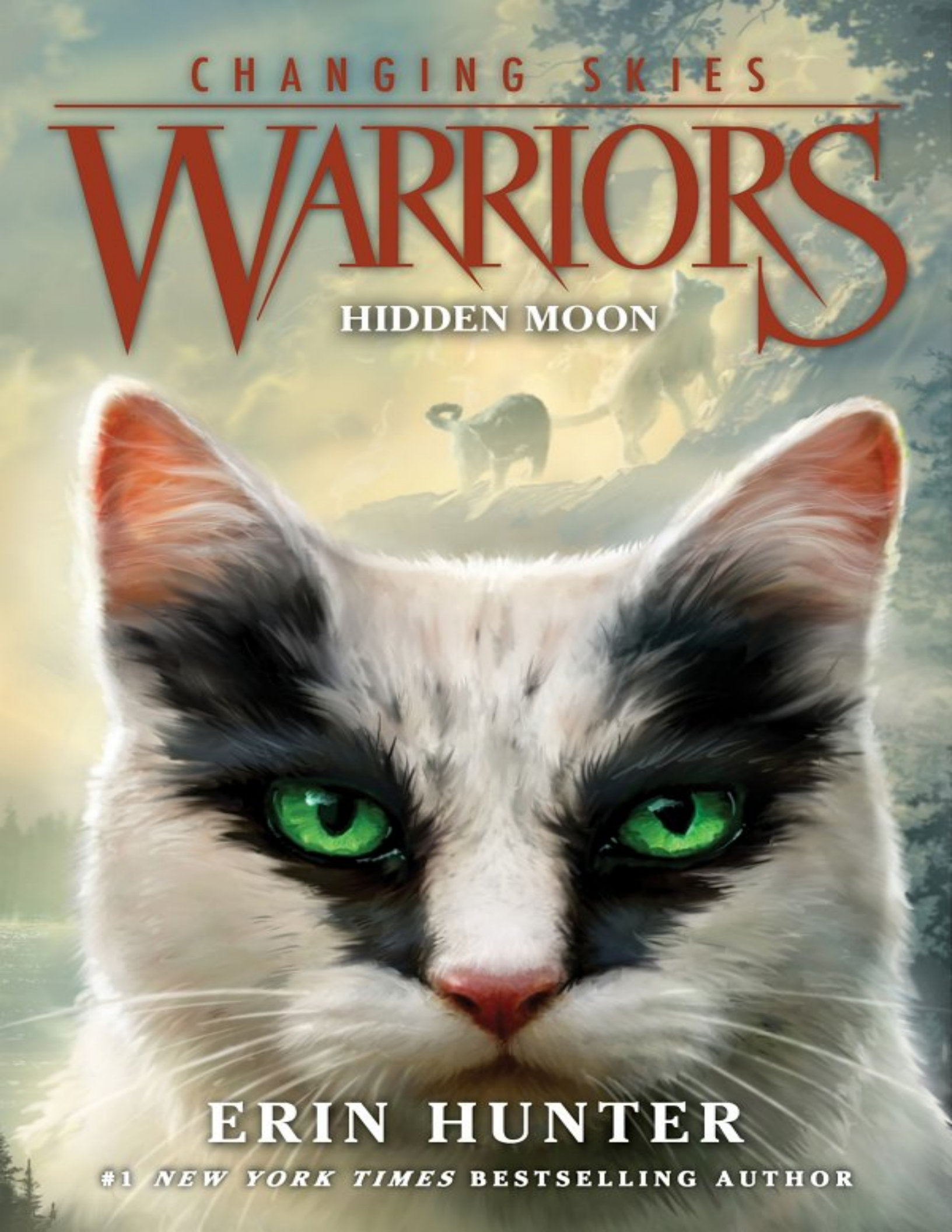
CHANGING SKIES
WARRIORS
HIDDEN MOON
ERIN HUNTER
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHANGING SKIES

WARRIORS

HIDDEN MOON

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

In memory of Lucky and Jacky

Special thanks to Clarissa Hutton

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Allegiances

ThunderClan

LEADER	**SQUIRRELSTAR—**dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw
DEPUTY	**IVYPOOL—**silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes
MEDICINE CATS	**JAYFEATHER—**gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes
	ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes
WARRIORS	(toms and she-cats without kits)
	WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes
	BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom
	MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom
	BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom
	BRISTLECLAW—orange-and-white tabby she-cat
	SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat **APPRENTICE, MOONPAW** (she-cat whose face is split between black and orange tabby)
	POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat
	LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes
	NIGHTHEART—black tom
	WAFFLEPELT—gray-and-brown tom

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

STEMTAIL—orange tabby tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

GRAYWHISKER—white tom with gray spots

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with petal-shaped white patches

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

FERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom
APPRENTICE, GOLDENPAW (golden tabby tom)

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom
APPRENTICE, SHINEPAW (black she-cat)

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat

QUEENS

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

	MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat (mother of Oakkit, a pale brown tabby she-kit with white spots; Sunkit, an orange tabby tom; and Hazelkit, a tortoiseshell she-kit with white spots)
	FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat
ELDERS	(former warriors and queens, now retired)
	BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
	THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom
	CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes
	BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches
	BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

ShadowClan

LEADER	**TIGERSTAR—**dark brown tabby tom
DEPUTY	**CLOVERFOOT—**gray tabby she-cat
MEDICINE CATS	**PUDDLESHINE—**brown tom with white splotches
	SHADOWSIGHT—gray tabby tom
WARRIORS	**TAWNYPELT—**tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
	STONEWING—white tom
	SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom with slashed ears
	FLAXFOOT—brown tabby tom
	DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with green eyes
	CINNAMONTAIL—brown tabby she-cat with white paws
	SNOWBIRD—pure white she-cat with green eyes
	YARROWLEAF—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes
	GRASSHEART—pale brown tabby she-cat
	WHORLPELT—gray-and-white tom
	HOPWHISKER—calico she-cat
	BLAZEFIRE—white-and-ginger tom

	FLOWERSTEM—silver she-cat
	SNAKETOOTH—honey-colored tabby she-cat **APPRENTICE, REDPAW** (reddish-brown tom)
	SLATEFUR—sleek gray tom
	POUNCESTEP—gray tabby she-cat
	GULLSWOOP—white she-cat
	SPIRECLAW—black-and-white tom
	FRINGEWHISKER—white she-cat with brown splotches **APPRENTICE, SPRUCEPAW** (silver tabby-and-white she-cat)
	BIRCHFEATHER—light brown tom
	BLOOMPETAL—black she-cat
	FIRBARK—brown tabby tom
	WHISPERBREEZE—gray tom
	STREAMRIPPLE—gray tabby she-cat
	HOLLOWSPRING—black tom
	SPARROWTAIL—large brown tabby tom
QUEENS	**LIGHTLEAP—**brown tabby she-cat (mother to Quickkit, a ginger tabby tom, Beechkit, a pale brown tom, and Poolkit, a white she-cat)
ELDERS	**OAKFUR—**small brown tom

SkyClan

LEADER	**LEAFSTAR—**brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes
DEPUTY	**HAWKWING—**dark gray tom with yellow eyes
MEDICINE CATS	**FRECKLEWISH—**mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs
	FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom
MEDIATOR	**TREE—**yellow tom with amber eyes
WARRIORS	**MACGYVER—**black-and-white tom

DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

BEETLESHINE—white-and-black tabby tom

MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

NETTLESPLASH—pale brown tom

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat

VIOLETSHINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

BELLALEAF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears

PIGEONFOOT—gray-and-white she-cat

GRAVELNOSE—tan tom

APPRENTICE, ROBINPAW (reddish-brown she-cat)

SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat

BEESTING—white-and-tabby she-cat

NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

APPRENTICE, STARLINGPAW (black-and-white tom)

RIDGEGLOW—reddish she-cat with a white nose

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat

DUSKSHINE—white tom with brown paws and ears

QUEENS

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

SPARROWPELT—dark brown tabby tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

WindClan

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

WHISTLEBREEZE—gray tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

WOODSONG—brown she-cat

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

LEAFCURL—white she-cat with gray spots

CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom

GRASSFUR—auburn she-cat

BRANCHLEAP—white tom

SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat
APPRENTICE, SILKYPAW (long-haired gray tom)

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom

SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest

OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom

HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

	APPRENTICE, FLUFFPAW (fluffy pale brown tom)
	LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat
	BROOKRIPPLE—black-and-white tom
	STRIPEHEART—gray tabby tom
QUEENS	**APPLESHINE—**yellow tabby she-cat (mother to Rustlekit, a white tom with a brown tail, and Stretchkit, a brown tabby she-cat with white face markings)
ELDERS	**WHISKERNOSE—**light brown tom
	NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

RiverClan

LEADER	**ICESTAR—**white she-cat with blue eyes
DEPUTY	**OWLNOSE—**brown tabby tom
MEDICINE CATS	**MOTHWING—**dappled golden she-cat
	FROSTDAWN—light gray she-cat with blue eyes
WARRIORS	**DUSKFUR—**brown tabby she-cat
	MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat
	HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat
	TROUTSHINE—brown-and-white spotted tom
	MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom
	RAPIDSPLASH—gray-and-white she-cat
	PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom
	SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat
	LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom
	SNEEZECLOUD—gray-and-white tom
	BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat
	MISTPOOL—tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat
	GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears
	NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

GRAYSKY—silver tabby tom

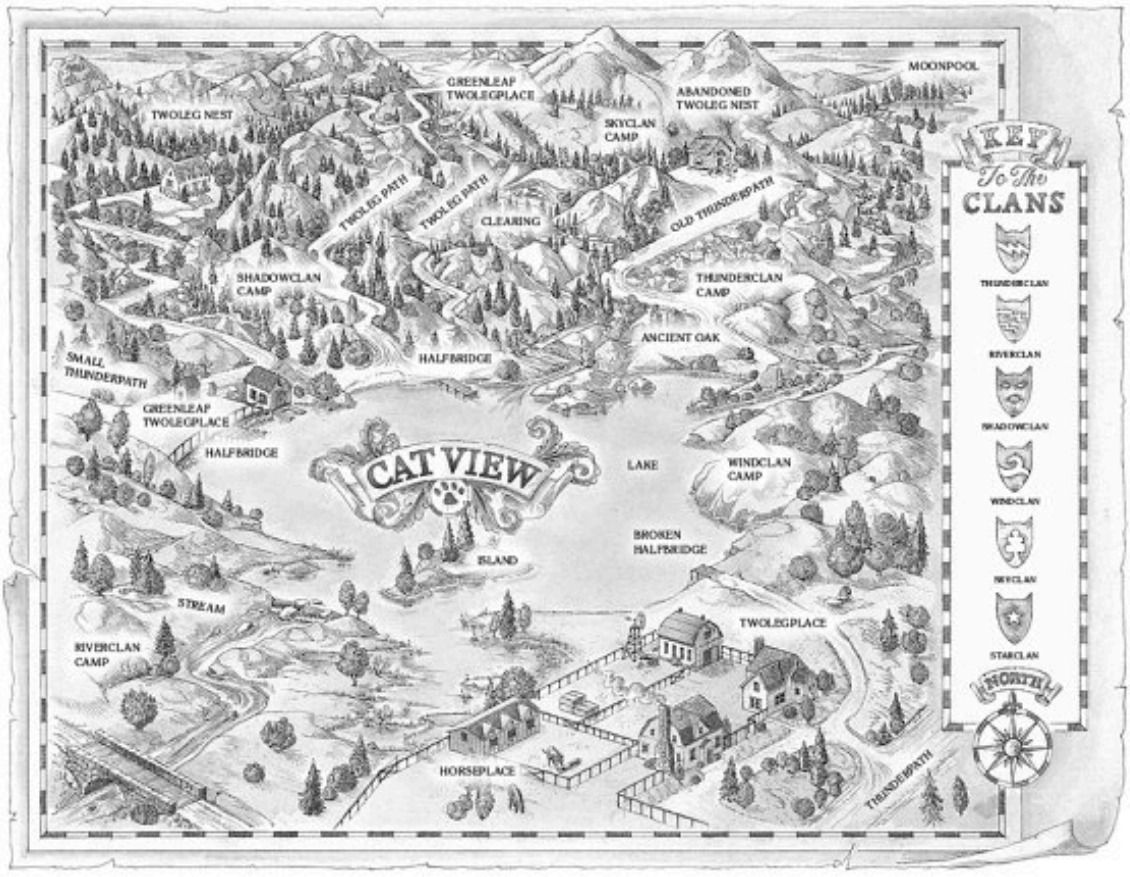
QUEENS

FLOATSHIMMER—tawny she-cat (mother to Heronkit, a silver she-kit, and Eelkit, a black tom)

ELDERS

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Maps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ABANDONED TWOLEG NEST
TWOLEG NEST
SKYCLAN CAMP
KEY To The CLANS
TWOLEG PATH
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CLEARING
OLD THUNDERPATH
SHADOWCLAN CAMP
THUNDERCLAN CAMP
ANCIENT OAK
SMALL THUNDERPATH
HALFBRIDGE
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
HALFBRIDGE
CAT VIEW
LAKE
WINDCLAN CAMP
BROKEN HALFBRIDGE
ISLAND
STREAM
TWOLEGPLACE
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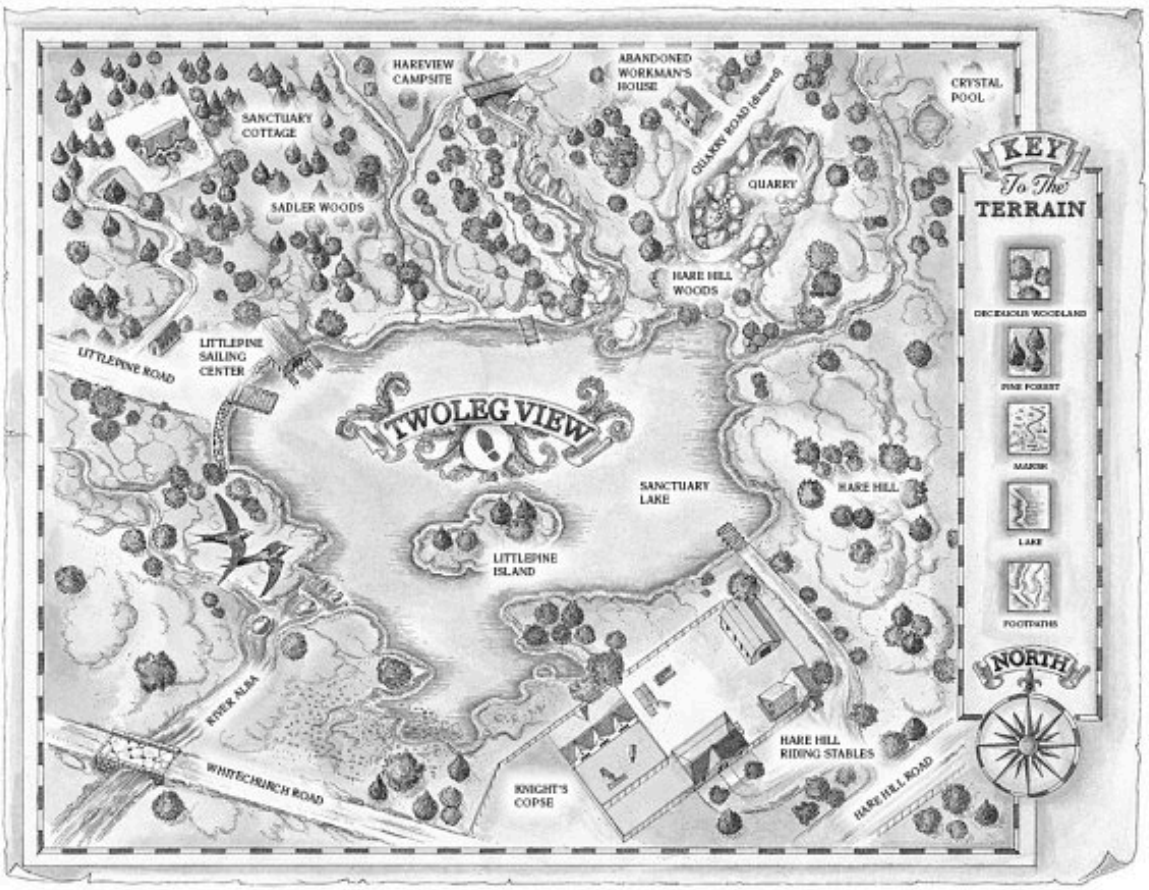
NORTH


HAREVIEW CAMPSITE
ABANDONED WORKMAN'S HOUSE
CRYSTAL POOL
SANCTUARY COTTAGE
QUARRY ROAD (Disused)
QUARRY
SADLER WOODS
HARE HILL WOODS
LITTLEPINE SAILING CENTER
LITTLEPINE ROAD
TWOLEG VIEW
SANCTUARY LAKE
HARE HILL
LITTLEPINE ISLAND
RIVER ALBA
WHITECHURCH ROAD
KNIGHT'S COPSE
HARE HILL RIDING STABLES
HARE HILL ROAD
KEY To The TERRAIN
DECIDUOUS WOODLAND
PINE FOREST
MARSH
LAKE
FOOTPATHS
NORTH

Prologue

Bramblestar braced himself as his daughter, Sparkkit, clambered onto his back, her short tail lashing with excitement. "Fox attack!" she meowed.

"Oh, no!" Bramblestar yowled in pretend terror. "How will I fight off this monster?"

"And another fox, too!" Alderkit barreled into Bramblestar's side. "I'm going to *eat* you!"

"This is so scary!" Bramblestar meowed, staggering backward. "But a warrior of ThunderClan always fights back!" Gently, he tumbled Sparkkit off his shoulders and curved one paw around Alderkit, pulling both into a playful battle. After a few moments of tussling, he fell dramatically onto his side. "Oof! I fought bravely, but these foxes were too much for me."

Sparkkit squirmed away to parade triumphantly around the clearing. But Alderkit snuggled closer to his father's side, his amber eyes wide. "A fox couldn't *really* beat you, could it?" he whispered. "You'd drive it away, right?"

"Of course I would. And we're safe here." Bramblestar gave Alderkit's ear a fond lick. "No fox will ever get into ThunderClan's camp."

Sparkkit pranced back over to them. "You could give us a badger ride," she suggested, beginning to climb onto her father's back

again.

"Oh, I could, could I?" Bramblestar asked, amused.

"Squirrelflight told us not to bother you if you were busy," Alderkit meowed. "She said Clan leaders are very busy sometimes."

"But we knew you weren't too busy to play with us." Sparkkit jumped back off Bramblestar's shoulder and gazed confidently up into his eyes. "You miss us when we're not here." She nuzzled Bramblestar's cheek, and the ThunderClan leader breathed in her sweet kit scent.

"I do miss you," he confessed. "I'm so proud of how you've grown up, of the strong warrior and the wise medicine cat you've become. But I miss this." His heart ached as he gazed down at the two kits.

Round-eyed with confusion, Alderkit and Sparkkit exchanged glances.

"We're not even apprentices yet!" Sparkkit meowed. "You're so silly!"

Alderkit spun in a circle. "One of us might be a *medicine cat*?" he asked. "Would we have to be as grumpy as Jayfeather?"

Bramblestar blinked. *Why did I say that?* He pushed the question away, focusing instead on enjoying the warm sun on his pelt and the cheerful voices of his kits. It was a good day, one of many since Alderkit and Sparkkit had entered his life.

Bramblestar stiffened, a jolt of fear running through him. A strange thought invaded his mind: *Things were so much easier then. Life was simpler.* Why did this sweet moment suddenly feel like a distant memory? Where was he now? His heart beating faster, he looked around, and he spotted his mate, Squirrelflight, and her sister, ThunderClan's medicine cat Leafpool, curled together at the entrance of the nursery.

Seeing them, Bramblestar breathed more easily. If Squirrelflight was there, looking content, nothing terrible could be happening.

But . . . Squirrel*flight*? The name didn't feel right. It seemed like a name he hadn't heard in a long time.

"Bramblestar?" Alderkit asked cautiously, putting his small paw on top of Bramblestar's large one. But Bramblestar, dizzy with sudden

panic, couldn't answer. *Did something happen to Squirrelflight? What have I forgotten?*

The clearing suddenly shifted and faded, everything thinning and vanishing like clearing smoke. The kits were gone. Squirrelflight was gone.

"No! *No!*" Bramblestar's meow was a broken gasp. "Come back!"

The world returned, but ThunderClan's camp was gone. Instead, a lush green meadow spread around him, and Bramblestar opened his mouth to taste the fresh scents of early greenleaf, mixed with a tantalizing hint of prey. The sky was clear, and sunlight warmed his back. A light breeze ruffled his fur.

I know this place.

As he began to calm, Bramblestar realized he was not alone. Leafpool sat a tail-length away, regarding him quietly. Dim stars shone in her pale tabby fur.

How did I forget? She couldn't have been in ThunderClan. Leafpool had been dead for seasons now, killed in a rockslide.

I'm in StarClan, he realized. And Bramble*claw* now, not Bramblestar. He'd given up his leadership and retired to the elders' den. He'd been unable to lead ThunderClan, drained and old before his time because of the moons he'd spent imprisoned in the Dark Forest.

Seeing Squirrelflight and the kits, seeing ThunderClan at peace back when he'd had the confidence to lead them, had that all been a dream?

"Am I . . . dead?" Brambleclaw asked, his chest tightening with dismay. He looked around, taking in the beauty and peace of StarClan's hunting grounds. *I don't want to be here. Not yet. Please.*

Leafpool blinked at him sympathetically. "You're not dead," she told him, and warm relief swept through him. He wasn't ready to leave his family, or his Clan.

She went on. "But there isn't much time. StarClan needs you to bring a warning to all the Clans."

Brambleclaw's ears twitched and he sat up straighter. *I can still be of use to the Clans,* he thought. "I'll do whatever I can."

Leafpool's eyes were bright and fierce. "Tell them that a fight is coming. You must all be ready."

There's always a fight coming. But Brambleclaw dipped his head respectfully. As he straightened back up, he saw Leafpool's jaw drop, her eyes widen in horror.

"What—" But his head was spinning again, Leafpool vanishing as if she'd never been there. StarClan faded and darkness swallowed him, only to be relieved at last by a dim pale light, the peace of StarClan replaced with a feeling of dread. Gray tree trunks rose above his head; thick, dark branches intertwined to block out the sky. If he could have seen the sky, he knew that it would have held no stars. A cold fog wafted around him, chilling Brambleclaw's bones.

I know this place, he thought again.

The Dark Forest.

Brambleclaw's pelt prickled with the distinct feeling that he was being watched. He looked around, turning slowly to see in every direction. There was nothing, just the dim stillness of the forest. No scent of prey, no breeze, just the heavy, oppressive fog and the feeling of hostile eyes.

Behind him, something growled, a low, guttural sound that promised *pain*.

With a gasp, Brambleclaw opened his eyes onto darkness.

But this was a warm, comfortable darkness, rich with the scents of his Clanmates. There was soft moss beneath him. Nearby, Cloudtail muttered something unintelligible, and Thornclaw grunted and shifted in his sleep.

The elders' den. Thank StarClan. Brambleclaw's heart was pounding so hard that it vibrated throughout his body, and part of him still wanted to *run*. He sat up in his nest, panting, trying to catch his breath. He hadn't dreamed of StarClan or of the Dark Forest in seasons, not since right after the Clans' defeat of Ashfur.

It was just a dream, he told himself. There was nothing evil here. Nothing waited outside the elders' den either; he could see faint stars in the sky through the den entrance. But still, Leafpool's warning echoed in his mind: *A fight is coming. You must all be ready.*

His fur rose along his spine as he stared out into the night.

Chapter 1

Tawnypelt blinked, trying to focus her eyes. She ached all over. Her chest was tight and her throat sore, and every breath she took made her feel like a rabbit had kicked her in the stomach with its powerful hind paws. *What's wrong with me?*

I must be unwell, she realized. She could smell herbs and fresh water. But, as her vision cleared, she saw there were dogwood branches around and above her instead of the familiar brambles of ShadowClan's medicine den. She recognized Frecklewish, SkyClan's senior medicine cat, mixing herbs together into some kind of poultice a short distance away from her.

At the sight, Tawnypelt's memories came flooding back. She was in SkyClan. Yesterday she had gone to investigate the place where the Twolegs were building their giant den near SkyClan's territory, and she had slipped and fallen a long way, into a pit the Twolegs had dug. She'd been badly hurt. In fact . . .

I died, she remembered suddenly, her stomach twisting.

She had traveled to StarClan, where she had reunited with her long-dead mate, Rowanclaw, and her lost kits, Dawnpelt and Flametail. She had been so glad to see them! And then Bluestar, the leader of ThunderClan when Tawnypelt was young, had told her that she had

to go back, that Tawnypelt was needed to save the Clans from a terrible darkness.

Beware the two-faced cat, she remembered. She tried to tell Frecklewish, but all that came out of her mouth was a thick, confused murmur.

"Take it easy, Tawnypelt," Frecklewish meowed reassuringly. "You need to rest and recover from your injuries. I'll get you some more poppy seeds."

She vanished farther into the medicine den, and Tawnypelt cleared her throat, then coughed, wincing at the sensation. *I must have breathed in half the earth at the bottom of that pit.*

It was good that she hadn't been able to tell Frecklewish about her vision, she realized. She needed to talk to Tigerstar, her son and leader, and the ShadowClan medicine cats before any other cat. Eventually, all the Clans would need to know what Bluestar had told her—but she would wait until she was safely back home, among cats of her own Clan, ones she knew she could trust.

"Thank you," she whispered as Frecklewish reappeared carrying a few poppy seeds on a dock leaf.

"You're welcome," the long-legged tabby answered. "Lick these up, and I'll bring you some water." She watched Tawnypelt take her medicine, then left and returned with a piece of moss soaked in water. The cold trickle of refreshment felt good against the dryness of Tawnypelt's throat, and she lapped at it eagerly.

Fidgetflake, the younger SkyClan medicine cat, stuck his head through the den's entrance. "Tigerstar and Shadowsight are here," he reported. "Is Tawnypelt up to seeing them?"

"I am," Tawnypelt meowed hoarsely before Frecklewish could answer. It would be a relief to see her kin after what she'd been through. And this was her opportunity to tell Tigerstar and Shadowsight about the message Bluestar had given her, if only she could talk to them in private.

Fidgetflake stepped inside, gesturing the visitors in with his tail. Tigerstar squeezed his powerful shoulders through the entrance to

the medicine den and immediately fixed his gaze on Tawnypelt, his amber eyes darkening in concern. “Are you all right?” he asked. “How do you feel?”

Shadowsight slipped in behind his father and brushed his cheek gently against Tawnypelt’s as he took a sharp look at her injuries.

“I’ll live,” Tawnypelt meowed weakly. “Frecklewish and Fidgetflake have been taking very good care of me.”

Tigerstar nodded respectfully to the medicine cats, then returned his gaze to Tawnypelt. “If you had *told* any cat where you were going instead of dashing off on your own, then we would have found you much faster.”

Beneath her soreness, Tawnypelt’s pelt prickled with familiar annoyance. She loved and respected Tigerstar, both as her son and as her leader, but his insistence on treating her like a kit who had barely stepped outside the nursery drove her *mad*. She swallowed down her angry response and instead meowed as lightly as she could, “Now, Tigerstar, you know I’m a veteran warrior who can make my own mistakes. And Birchfeather was with me. He ran and brought back help as soon as it happened.”

Tigerstar must have been even more worried about her than Tawnypelt had realized, because he merely looked annoyed at the mention of his youngest kit, who had left ShadowClan to become a SkyClan cat. Instead he turned to Shadowsight. “Look Tawnypelt over and see if we can take her back to ShadowClan.”

The sharpest of the pain was fading beneath the influence of the poppy seeds, and Tawnypelt’s mind was beginning to feel fuzzy again. She blinked slowly at Shadowsight, half hoping he would say she was too hurt to go home. She wanted to be back at ShadowClan’s camp, but she wasn’t sure she could make it there.

Shadowsight sighed. “I can tell from here that she’s not ready to travel,” he meowed, one of his ears flattening in concern. “If SkyClan is willing to have her, it would be much better to let her recover for a few more days before she journeys back to ShadowClan.”

Tawnypelt’s head felt too heavy for her to raise it and look at the SkyClan cats, but she heard Frecklewish’s answer. “I agree with Shadowsight. We’ve patched Tawnypelt up as well as we can, but

she was in bad shape when we brought her here. SkyClan would be honored to take care of her until she's strong enough to travel."

"I'll speak with Hawkwing before we go," Tigerstar meowed. "And we'll send some warriors over with prey for the fresh-kill pile while Tawnypelt's here. We don't expect SkyClan to give away their prey."

Was that a subtle dig at SkyClan for having asked to hunt on ShadowClan land just over a moon ago, when some of their prey had been poisoned by the Twolegs? Or was it simply Tigerstar's pride talking? Tawnypelt would have given her son a pointed look, but she was too sleepy. *Those poppy seeds are powerful.* The pain was dull enough now that she thought she would sleep again soon.

"We'll give you three a moment alone while Tawnypelt's still awake," Frecklewish meowed, and Tawnypelt heard both SkyClan medicine cats leave the medicine den.

This is my chance. She could tell Tigerstar what she had learned in StarClan, warn him about the peril that was coming. She shook her head a little, trying to chase away the fog that seemed to fill her mind, and it sent a shock of pain through her. Despite herself, she whimpered.

"Be still," Shadowsight meowed softly, much closer to her now.

"I have to . . ." Her tongue felt heavy and thick. "Tigerstar."

"What is it?" Her son was close beside her. "Don't strain yourself."

"The . . . the . . ." *Beware the two-faced cat.* "Darkness . . ." *Darkness is coming.* Why couldn't she speak?

"She's talking nonsense," she heard Tigerstar meow. "What's wrong with her?" His voice was tight with worry.

Shadowsight's whiskers brushed against her again. When had her eyes closed? Tawnypelt tried to open them, but her eyelids felt as heavy as stones.

"It's the poppy seeds," she heard Shadowsight answer, as if from a distance. "They can be very potent. They'll let Tawnypelt sleep without pain, and sleep is the best thing for her now."

"She *will* be all right though, won't she?" Tawnypelt didn't hear Shadowsight's reply, but when Tigerstar spoke again, he sounded less anxious. "Rest now, Tawnypelt. We'll come back soon to bring you home."

Tawnypelt tried once more to raise her head and speak. *I have a message from StarClan. You must listen to me!* But she couldn't force the words out. With a huge effort, she managed to pry open her eyes just a crack. Shadowsight's gray tabby tail was disappearing through the medicine den entrance as he followed his father away. *Come back,* she tried to meow, but sleep was already pulling her down.

When she blinked back awake, Tawnypelt was aware that time had passed. The light shining through the medicine-den entrance had dimmed, and she could tell it was long past sunhigh. Birchfeather was sitting by her nest, his light brown tail curled around his paws.

"She's been asleep since your father was here," Tawnypelt heard Fidgetflake meow from the other side of the den.

"I'm awake now," she croaked, and Birchfeather turned toward her.

"Thank StarClan," he meowed. "You're looking much better than when we brought you here yesterday. I've got some fresh-kill for you." He nudged a sparrow toward her, but Tawnypelt didn't take a bite. It seemed like too much effort to eat.

"I'm glad you were with me," she told him, remembering that Birchfeather had run all the way back to SkyClan's camp to get help after she had fallen. He had helped carry her here. It was still an effort to speak, but she wanted to let him know she appreciated that he had saved her. "It's good I have kin in SkyClan, or who knows how long I would have lain in that pit."

Birchfeather's face darkened. "You don't have kin in SkyClan. Yet."

Tawnypelt heard a sigh from the corner. "Birchfeather. . . . ," Fidgetflake meowed.

"It's true," Birchfeather snapped. "I've passed two of my trials, but Hawkwing and Leafstar are waiting until StarClan gives Hawkwing his nine lives to assign me the third task, so that Hawkwing can be the one to make me a SkyClan warrior. But when will that happen? It's not *fair*."

"We couldn't go to the Moonpool yesterday because we were taking care of Tawnypelt," Fidgetflake explained patiently.

Birchfeather looked a little embarrassed. "Of course that was a good reason to stay in camp," he meowed. "But I just heard you're not going to the Moonpool tonight either."

"It's too cloudy," Fidgetflake told him. "It's going to rain, and without a moon there's no point in going to the Moonpool. We wouldn't be able to share tongues with StarClan."

"It's always *something*," Birchfeather burst out. "Ridgeglow and I need to start our lives together. I should have been a SkyClan warrior for half a moon already."

Fidgetflake didn't answer. Instead he came over to stand beside them, carrying a dock leaf with some poppy seeds on it. "Lap these up and take a few bites of the sparrow with it," he instructed Tawnypelt. "Eating prey will keep the seeds from upsetting your stomach."

Obediently, Tawnypelt bent her head to lick up the seeds, then nibbled at the sparrow. She could feel herself sinking down toward sleep again. She mumbled to Birchfeather through a yawn, "That's Clan life. Leaders have many things they have to do, and they focus on what's most important. Sometimes their Clanmates have to be patient."

If you came back to ShadowClan, Tigerstar would make Ridgeglow a ShadowClan warrior as quickly as he could, she thought but didn't say. Tigerstar and Dovewing were distraught that their youngest kit had chosen to change Clans. Birchfeather's mate-to-be, Ridgeglow, had refused to come to ShadowClan, though, insisting that they raise their future kits in SkyClan.

Birchfeather's tail twitched angrily. "I just feel like no one cares about making me a warrior. Since I wasn't born in SkyClan and I don't have kin here, no cat except Ridgeglow is interested in whether I become part of the Clan or not."

"That's just not true, Birchfeather," Fidgetflake argued.

Tawnypelt yawned again. *Birchfeather is used to having Tigerstar worry about him.* ShadowClan's leader cared about his kin more than

anything. It must be strange for Birchfeather to feel like just another warrior.

"I wish leaders thought about *all* their warriors," Birchfeather went on.

A spark of anger warmed Tawnypelt's chest. When her mate, Rowanstar, had been leader of ShadowClan, he had tried so hard to hold the Clan together. And some of the apprentices and young warriors had turned against him, frustrated that they weren't the center of things. Of course, Birchfeather wasn't like them—he would be loyal to his new Clan and leader—but she didn't like how he spoke.

"It's not . . . you should . . ." A wave of tiredness washed over her, and she could barely understand her own words.

"Oh." Birchfeather sounded apologetic, his voice softer. "I'm sorry, Tawnypelt, you don't need to listen to this." He hesitated, and then she felt him lick her cheek gently. "You rest. I'll come back and see you tomorrow."

Tawnypelt let her eyes slowly shut, hearing Birchfeather go. A little later there was a murmur of voices at the den entrance, but she didn't stir. She felt like she was sinking more and more deeply into her nest.

"Don't judge him too harshly. He's still young, and he has a good heart," a deep meow came from beside her.

Opening her eyes and turning painlessly to meet the amber gaze of the cat beside her nest, Tawnypelt felt a rush of relief. *Rowanclaw!* She'd been hoping he would visit her from StarClan again. Everything was easier when Rowanclaw was with her. "I know," she meowed. "It's not Birchfeather I'm worried about, not really. I have to tell the Clans about the warning Bluestar gave me. And I couldn't make Tigerstar listen."

"He was more worried about you being hurt," Rowanclaw meowed reassuringly. "He's a good son, even though he's stubborn. You'll tell

him as soon as you're back on your paws."

"But that may be too late," Tawnypelt worried. "The Clans are in danger." She repeated what Bluestar had told her, reminding herself of the exact wording. "A great peril is about to befall the Clans. . . . The end of an era approaches. . . . I must lead the Clans out of the moonless darkness and onto a new path. . . . I must not lose my way, even after the stars have faded. . . . Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world." She stared anxiously at Rowanclaw. "The longer it takes before the Clan leaders listen to me, the worse our problems are going to get."

Rowanclaw brushed his tail across her back tenderly. "Then you should rest as much as you can. The sooner you get better, the sooner you can give the Clans your message."

"Oh, Rowanclaw." Tawnypelt's heart ached with affection. "What would I do without you? You're the only one who can help me."

Chapter 2

"Great . . . peril . . ."

Starlingpaw paused in his task of changing the moss in the medicine cats' nests to nervously eye the tortoiseshell-and-white ShadowClan cat. *Tawnypelt,* that was what Fidgetflake had said her name was.

He also told me she wouldn't wake up while I was here, Starlingpaw thought. The medicine cats had left the den to share prey, and Fidgetflake had *promised* nothing would happen with their patient while they were gone, that she'd just had some poppy seeds and would sleep the whole time. Tawnypelt had been so badly hurt when they'd carried her into camp, Starlingpaw had been afraid she would die. She and Birchfeather had gone to where the Twolegs were building their giant den and she'd fallen there. Birchfeather had come running into camp, yowling for his soon-to-be Clanmates to save her. She looked better now, but Starlingpaw was still afraid she might get worse, or need help, when he was alone with her. And then what would he do?

Starlingpaw glanced out of the medicine den, spotting Fidgetflake and Frecklewish sharing a squirrel on the other side of the clearing. They didn't look like they were planning to come back right away. He turned back to his work, fluffing the moss to make it nice and soft.

The ShadowClan cat muttered something else, too quietly for Starlingpaw to hear, and he hesitated. "Are you okay? Tawnypelt?"

She didn't answer.

I can't be in charge of a sick cat. What if something happens before I can call the medicine cats? What if she dies*?* Starlingpaw had been responsible for his own father's death, after all. He'd run after the patrol that was supposed to drive off the badger on their territory, foolishly thinking he could help. But he'd distracted Kitescratch, and Kitescratch had been killed. He couldn't be trusted with any cat's safety. The medicine cats *knew* that; every cat in SkyClan knew it. Why had they left him alone with their patient?

As he watched, Tawnypelt tensed, her body going rigid. Was she in pain? Should he call for the medicine cats? Starlingpaw took a step closer to the den's entrance.

He stopped as a low voice came from behind him, Tawnypelt's meow as clear as a bird's call. "The Clans are in danger. Moonless darkness approaches . . . faded stars . . ." Her voice rose into a yowl. "Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world!"

The fur rose along Starlingpaw's spine. Was she talking to him? What was she saying? It didn't sound like anything he had ever heard a cat say. It was like she was warning him about the future.

Was she making some kind of prophecy? She wasn't a medicine cat, but maybe warriors sometimes had a connection to StarClan. Or perhaps there was something special about Tawnypelt. Fur rose along Starlingpaw's spine and he shivered.

He hurried over to stand beside her nest. The ShadowClan cat had rolled onto her side and was writhing, her claws extended and front paws striking the air as if she were warding off an attacker. Starlingpaw stretched out his own paw to touch her—*maybe I can calm her down*—but hesitated, his paw hanging in midair. *What if I make her worse?*

Tawnypelt began to mutter again, a quiet, worried moan, and rolled her head from side to side. "I can't stop the darkness . . . moonless

night . . . I don’t know, don’t know who the two-faced cat is.”

Is she awake? Starlingpaw leaned closer, looking into Tawnypelt’s face. Her eyes were closed, but he could see them moving rapidly beneath their lids.

Suddenly the ShadowClan cat’s eyes shot open. They were bright green, and they stared into Starlingpaw’s own eyes so intensely that he felt as if she were looking through him, into his heart. “You’re the only one who can help me,” she meowed.

Starlingpaw stumbled backward, tripping over his own paws. “Me? Help with what?” He searched Tawnypelt’s face, but her eyes had slipped shut again. “Tawnypelt? Why are the Clans in danger?”

He held his breath, his heart pounding. Did she really mean . . . him? Starlingpaw? Would she say anything else? He watched as the older cat’s face and body relaxed back into deep sleep. After a few heartbeats she let out a soft snore.

He nudged her gently, feeling guilty about trying to wake a sick cat. But if the Clans were in danger, he had to know what she could tell him. “Tawnypelt? Tell me again what’s happening?”

But she didn’t wake.

Should he report Tawnypelt’s words to Fidgetflake and Frecklewish? Messages from StarClan were medicine-cat business. Starlingpaw twitched his tail thoughtfully. But . . . if StarClan was sending their message to *him*, and sending it through Tawnypelt, maybe they didn’t want the medicine cats to know.

After all, medicine cats talked to StarClan all the time. StarClan must have its reasons. If the prophecy had come to a warrior and an apprentice, it was because those were the cats who StarClan wanted to know.

Not knowing what else to do, Starlingpaw went back to refreshing the other nests in the medicine den. It was probably just nonsense. But as he tucked in pieces of bracken and fresh moss, his mind was spinning. It hadn’t sounded like nonsense. It had sounded important.

M*oonless darkness. . . .*

A two-faced cat . . .

And I *am the only one who can help? Me?*

Maybe Tawnypelt was just delirious and muttering about her dreams. She was injured, and perhaps feverish. The medicine cats had given her poppy seeds. When he was still in the nursery, he had cut his paw badly and Fidgetflake had given him a single poppy seed; it had made him drowsy and confused.

But it hadn't made him yowl what sounded like prophecies. It made the most sense that Tawnypelt was passing on a message from StarClan, didn't it? Thinking hard, he wove a piece of bracken into the edge of Fidgetflake's nest.

Times had been hard and confusing in SkyClan over the last few moons. First, one of the streams on their territory had been poisoned and the prey had gone bad, so every cat was hungry and anxious. Then the badgers had settled on their territory and Kitescratch . . . Starlingpaw winced, tucking his tail between his legs. The Twolegs were building something huge and strange not far from SkyClan's territory. And then Leafstar had been forced to step down, and they didn't really have a leader yet, not until StarClan gave Hawkwing nine lives.

It would make sense for StarClan to have a message for them.

But why him? A message for Starlingpaw, *the only one who could help*. Suddenly he realized what was special about him: He'd been responsible for his father's death. Was StarClan giving him a chance to redeem himself? Determination made him raise his head, his paws pausing in his work, the bracken dangling from one claw. If he was the only one who could help, that meant that he needed to do what StarClan asked of him. Tawnypelt had yowled that Starlingpaw was the only one who could help *her*, so it must be something StarClan wanted them to do together.

But what was that? *How* could he help?

The nests finished, he crossed the den again and looked down at Tawnypelt. Maybe StarClan would send him a clearer message through her. Or maybe she would wake up and explain everything to him. But the older cat was firmly asleep, her mouth a little open, and breathing heavily.

As he hesitated, Fidgetflake came through the medicine-den entrance. “The nests look good, Starlingpaw, thank you,” he meowed, taking a brisk look around. “Everything okay in here?”

Now was the time to tell Fidgetflake about Tawnypelt’s words. But Starlingpaw was silent. *If StarClan wants the medicine cats to know, they’ll tell them,* he thought. *This is just for me. And Tawnypelt. I’m the only one who can help her.*

“It’s all fine,” he answered Fidgetflake, and, flicking his ears in farewell, he left.

Outside, he walked a few steps from the entrance, and then his paws slowed. He still didn’t understand what StarClan wanted him to do. Was there any cat he could trust to give him a little advice? He scanned SkyClan’s camp, looking for inspiration.

Dark gray clouds were massing overhead, and it looked like a storm was coming. Only a few cats lingered in the grassy clearing. Many of those who weren’t out hunting had already taken shelter in their dens, or beneath the stones and trees surrounding the grassy valley where SkyClan had their camp.

Frecklewish, still nibbling at the remains of the squirrel she had been sharing with Fidgetflake, was chatting with Bellaleaf near the warriors’ den. But Frecklewish was a medicine cat, and Starlingpaw had already decided against telling them Tawnypelt’s words. If he was wrong, StarClan could come to Frecklewish in her dreams, or at the Moonpool.

Leafstar, who would remain SkyClan’s leader until StarClan gave Hawkwing nine lives, seemed half-asleep on the rock outside the leader’s den. Her son, Harrybrook, was sitting nearby, watching their Clanmates with a guarded, hostile expression. All of SkyClan knew he resented what he saw as their betrayal of his mother. Starlingpaw hunched his shoulders and avoided both their gazes. He couldn’t talk to Leafstar.

Hawkwing, SkyClan’s deputy, soon to be leader, wasn’t in sight, but Starlingpaw didn’t want to talk to him, either. The deputy was running the Clan now, doing the leader’s duties on top of his own. Anyway, Starlingpaw knew that Hawkwing and Leafstar both blamed him for Kitescratch’s death. Leafstar had told Starlingpaw so in those

first moments after his father had died, although she'd tried to soften her words later. He didn't want to face either of them.

His littermate, Robinpaw, came out of the warriors' den carrying clumps of dry moss and dropped them outside before heading back in. Her task was taking longer than his—the warriors had many more nests to freshen. On a normal day, he would have offered to help her, but he had more important things to think about now.

There's no use in talking to her about this, he thought. Robinpaw wouldn't know any more than Starlingpaw did. She might even purr with laughter at the idea that StarClan had chosen him for something special.

Starlingpaw's mentor, Nectarsong, was sharing tongues with Reedclaw on the other side of the clearing. Starlingpaw hesitated, but then shook his head. He liked Nectarsong, and she'd already taught him a lot—a proper hunting stance, the beginnings of being a good fighter, the best places to find prey. But he didn't know her that well yet. He wasn't sure how the brown she-cat would react if he told her what had happened.

Then, under a birch tree at the edge of SkyClan's camp, Starlingpaw spotted his mother, Needleclaw, curled next to her littermate, Rootspring. *Yes!* Needleclaw was one of the cleverest cats and finest warriors in SkyClan. And she always took Starlingpaw and Robinpaw seriously.

He hurried toward her, his pelt prickling under the weight of other cats' eyes. Was every cat watching him? In the first days after his father's vigil, he'd heard conversations break off when he got close, and cats had gazed at him sadly, only to look away when he met their eyes.

As he got closer to his mother, his steps slowed again. She was curled close to her brother, as if taking strength from him, her dark head resting on his yellow back. Was she talking to him about Kitescratch's death? Starlingpaw supposed it was natural Rootspring would comfort her—not only was he her littermate, but Starlingpaw had heard he'd loved a cat from another Clan who'd died horribly, doing something great to save all the Clans. That was one reason cats like Birchfeather could switch Clans to be with the cats they

loved now. Rootspring had lost his mate and would understand what Needleclaw was going through. Guilt twisted viciously in Starlingpaw's stomach.

M*aybe this was a bad idea.*

He'd been so sure that Needleclaw was the right cat to confide in that, for a few breaths, he'd forgotten how things had changed.

But he kept walking until he stood beside them. Two pairs of matching sky-blue eyes looked up at him.

"Starlingpaw," his mother meowed slowly. "How are you?" Her voice was low and sad.

"I'm okay." *She doesn't want me here. Why would she?* He felt like they'd been avoiding each other since Kitescratch died. His mother had turned inward, grieving, and he'd been afraid to approach her. *She knows who's responsible for Kitescratch's death. Everyone does.*

"Well, sit down," Needleclaw waved her tail, gesturing him closer. "Have you eaten?"

"I'm not hungry." He sat, the guilt swirling inside him growing stronger. She'd never say to him that her sorrow was his fault, but she must be thinking it.

"Nectarsong says you're doing very well," Needleclaw mentioned after a few heartbeats of silence.

"How do you like her as a mentor?" Rootspring asked.

"She's okay. She's good. I'm learning a lot," Starlingpaw answered. His words trailed off and he tried to think of something else to tell them. "I like hunting."

"I was a terrible apprentice," Rootspring meowed cheerfully. "But I got there in the end. Your mother learned much faster than I did."

"Well, Kitescratch and Turtlecrawl picked on you so much when we started training," Needleclaw meowed, sounding faintly amused. "They were a couple of moons older than us, but it took them a while to grow up." A shadow passed over her face and she stared down at her paws.

"Your father enjoyed being bigger than me and knowing more," Rootspring meowed to Starlingpaw. "But he hardly ever teased Needleclaw. Maybe he already liked her then."

"Maybe," Starlingpaw answered, hunching his shoulders. He found it hard to believe that Kitescratch had ever teased any cat. He'd always been so kind, so proud of Starlingpaw and Robinpaw, so ready to teach them anything they wanted to know.

He remembered Kitescratch whisking his tail back and forth outside the nursery when they'd been tiny kits, letting them practice their pounces on him. He'd carried them on his back when they were tired, and when they were hungry, he'd brought them all the different kinds of prey he could find, so they could decide what they liked best.

Starlingpaw closed his eyes, his heart aching. Why had he ever followed that patrol? What had he been thinking?

He'd wanted to see a badger, and he'd been confident that he could safely watch the patrol fight it from a distance. But things had gone wrong so fast! The badger had started tearing at Kitescratch with its sharp yellow teeth. Starlingpaw had run toward him and the other warriors without thinking, wanting to help.

His sudden appearance had startled Leafstar, and she'd turned to strike at him, thinking he was another badger. Kitescratch had rushed over to push her away. He'd *saved* Starlingpaw. While they were all distracted and looking away from the fight, the bigger badger had turned on Kitescratch and bitten deeply into his throat.

Kitescratch had lived long enough to run away with them, but he hadn't made it back to SkyClan's camp. There had been so much blood. Starlingpaw could still see it behind his closed eyelids, how the dark red blood had stained his father's lighter reddish-brown fur, how it had pooled on the frost-hardened ground.

Leafstar had turned on him and told him what he already knew: If he hadn't shown up at the worst possible time, hadn't followed a patrol he wasn't supposed to be on, it never would have happened. His father would be alive.

A soft tail brushed over his back, and Starlingpaw opened his eyes. His mother was staring at him, her eyes dark with sorrow. "I know you miss Kitescratch," she meowed. "I do too."

Guilt filled him, blocking his throat and trapping his words inside for a moment, and then he swallowed and croaked, "Yeah." *I know you miss him.* He got to his feet. "I'm hungry. I'm going to get something to eat."

He hurried away toward the fresh-kill pile, unwilling to spend another moment with his mother. How could she bear to look at him? He stared at the prey. Even though he wasn't hungry, it gave him an excuse not to meet any cat's eyes. He picked up the smallest mouse on the pile, just as the first drops of rain hit his pelt.

For a heartbeat, he had forgotten all about Tawnypelt's vision. He couldn't have asked Needleclaw about the prophecy anyway. He couldn't give her anything new to worry about. But the words came back to him as he carried the mouse to some sheltering bracken.

Rain began to pour down as Starlingpaw took an unenthusiastic bite. Even though he was huddled beneath the bracken, his pelt was quickly getting soaked.

Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world.

He swallowed hard, choking down the prey. He just needed to figure out who the two-faced cat was. Maybe if he solved that riddle, he would save SkyClan from a terrible fate. Save *all* the Clans, even, like the she-cat Rootspring had once loved.

You're the only one who can help.

If that was true, he had to do everything he could. No matter what.

Then maybe he'd be able to forgive himself. He'd have done something good, something important. StarClan was giving him a chance to redeem himself, and he needed to take it. Maybe then he'd be able to stop thinking of himself only as the cat who'd caused Kitescratch's death.

Chapter 3

"One more time," Sunbeam meowed encouragingly. She tapped the side of Moonpaw's right front leg with one paw. "Stand with your legs a little farther apart. It'll help you keep your balance. Now pay close attention as I sneak up on you. You'll be able to sense when I get close enough to strike."

Sunbeam walked behind Moonpaw, out of her view, and Moonpaw listened hard. There was a cold breeze blowing through the forest that ran through her fur, making her shiver, and rattled the dead leaves hanging from the nearby trees. Twitching her ears, she tried to hear past the sounds of the wind.

There. She heard the quiet padding of Sunbeam's paws coming closer and the older cat's soft, even breathing. Opening her mouth to taste the air, she caught her mentor's scent. Tensing, she listened as Sunbeam came closer still, trying to gauge exactly where the other cat was.

Now. Sunbeam was almost right behind her. She heard her mentor's paws shift on the ground as she crouched to pounce. Keeping her claws sheathed, Moonpaw shifted all her weight onto her front paws, just like Sunbeam had shown her, and kicked out hard with her back legs.

There was a satisfying grunt as her hind paws hit the other cat.

Yeah, get her! Fight, Moonpaw! Kick her again! Moonpaw shook her head a little, as if she could shake away the voice in her mind.

"Good work!" Sunbeam meowed, a little breathless, as Moonpaw's paws landed on the ground again. "I think you've really got the basic battle moves down. Maybe tomorrow we can train with Goldenpaw and Shinepaw and have you all practice together. Mock battles can be fun. I'll ask Finleap and Flipclaw tonight what they think."

Moonpaw fluffed her tail proudly. "Can we practice that front-paw strike again?" she asked. "I think I've got it nearly perfect." She was really enjoying battle practice, she realized. The moves came to her more easily than hunting had at first.

Sunbeam gave her an approving look but shook her head. "It's getting late." She glanced up at the sky.

Following her gaze, Moonpaw saw that the sun was nearing the horizon. The sky was gray and heavy with clouds. It had rained the past few nights, and it would probably rain again tonight. Moonpaw was tired and cold and, now that she thought about it, her paws were sore, but she looked pleadingly at Sunbeam anyway. "Can't we train just a little longer?"

With a purr of laughter, Sunbeam nudged Moonpaw's side, pushing her gently toward camp. "Absolutely not. I'm getting tired and hungry, and I'm sure you are too. Apprentices need plenty of food and sleep to grow into strong warriors, you know."

Moonpaw tried to stand up straighter, to look stronger. "I'm fine!" she meowed eagerly. "I can keep going!"

"Apprentices also need to listen to their mentors, Moonpaw," Sunbeam replied, sounding less amused. "I'm proud of you, and I'm glad you're so eager to train, but it's time to rest and eat now, and that's final." Brushing her tail affectionately across Moonpaw's shoulders, she led the way back toward camp.

There was no point in pushing anymore, Moonpaw thought. *I'd only make Sunbeam mad at me.* The older she-cat was a great mentor, and Moonpaw wanted her approval. It was just that . . . the harder Moonpaw trained, the easier it was to ignore the orange cat's voice. Her *sister's* voice, according to what her parents had told her.

A sister who'd died when they were tiny kits, who she'd never known but who, somehow, had stayed beside her.

That was really boring, the other cat meowed, as if she'd summoned her. *I bet a real fight would be more fun.*

I'm not going to listen, Moonpaw thought firmly, trying to close her mind to the orange cat's voice even as she heard her huff of irritation. She focused on the dry leaves crunching beneath her paws and the muddy leaf-fall ground underneath. Tasting the air, she thought hard about all the different scents she could catch—the scents of the different ThunderClan warriors who had passed through this spot today, and the smell of the trees all around her, distinct from the dry, moldy smell of dead leaves. She could sense a dampness in the air, the scent of rain to come. There was a faint odor of mouse and a stronger one of squirrel. *The scent of oak trees is completely different from how birch trees smell,* she noted. *More bitter.*

Moonpaw had realized that if she thought very hard of other things all the time, she barely heard the orange cat's voice.

She followed Sunbeam through the thorn tunnel into the stone hollow of ThunderClan's camp, where they both stopped at the fresh-kill pile. Moonpaw's stomach grumbled as she picked out a plump shrew.

"You did well today, Moonpaw," praised Sunbeam as she picked up her own piece of prey and headed toward her mate, Nightheart, who was sitting nearby. Moonpaw waved her tail in acknowledgment and carried her shrew over to sit outside the apprentices' den.

Shinepaw and Goldenpaw, her denmates and Sunbeam's kits, were already sharing a squirrel, and they greeted her cheerfully.

"I think I caught that shrew," Goldenpaw boasted, leaning over to look. "It's a good fat one, isn't it? Finleap and I went hunting this afternoon, and he told me I was doing very well. He thinks I'll be one of the best hunters in ThunderClan someday."

Shinepaw rolled her eyes. "So I'm sure *that* shrew is better than any other shrew in our whole hunting grounds. Flipclaw and I went on a border patrol this afternoon and we scented a fox. It didn't cross the border, but Squirrelstar is going to warn the other Clans at

the next Gathering, because it might go onto one of the other territories. We might have to band together and drive it off if it stays near the lake."

"Oh, how very important," Goldenpaw commented. "If you saw a fox, you'd be up a tree so fast that there'd be nothing to see but a black blur."

As the other two apprentices bickered, Moonpaw took a bite of her shrew. *I wonder if my littermate and I would have teased each other like this.* Despite their frequent arguing, she knew that Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were the best of friends.

I'd like to share prey, the voice in her mind whispered. *I bet I could eat twice as fast as you.*

No, I'm not thinking about my littermate and what might have happened. It doesn't matter. She concentrated instead on the feeling of her fangs sinking into the shrew and the taste of its meat. *Juicy. It's so good to eat after a long day of training.* She swallowed, careful to notice how the muscles in her throat moved. *I'm paying attention to this so hard that I can't hear any voices in my head.*

"—paw?" Shinepaw and Goldenpaw were both staring at her. Blinking, Moonpaw realized they had been calling her name.

"Sorry, what?"

"We were just asking what you did today," Shinepaw answered. "Are you all right? It was like you were in some kind of trance."

"Yeah, of course. I'm fine. Uh, Sunbeam showed me some fighting moves. She suggested we could all do battle practice together tomorrow, if your mentors agree."

"Great!" Goldenpaw perked up. "I can't wait to learn how to fight off ThunderClan's enemies. Finleap told me he'd teach me how to rake an enemy's belly with my claws. It's one of the best moves for battle. Maybe we'll learn tomorrow."

"It does sound fun," Shinepaw admitted. "Although you'll have to get a little faster to catch any cat's belly in *your* claws, Goldenpaw."

Ignoring her littermate's yowl of outrage, she narrowed her green eyes at Moonpaw. "Are you sure you're okay? You look really tired."

Now that Moonpaw was sitting down, the tiredness she'd been hiding from Sunbeam washed over her. Suddenly, all she wanted to do was sleep. She choked down the last bite of her shrew and rose unsteadily to her paws. "You're right, I'm going to sleep. See you in the morning."

She staggered into the apprentices' den and collapsed into her nest. Her eyes closed almost of their own accord, and it felt as if she was sinking deeper and deeper into her nest, sleep rising to swallow her.

Moonpaw's paws thudded across the grassy moor and her heart pounded hard. Her breath was coming in wheezy gasps. She'd been running for a long time, she thought. A little distance ahead of her, the orange cat was walking unhurriedly, her tail held high. Moonpaw couldn't see her face, just her back and her long, steady stride.

I have to catch her.

Moonpaw ran faster. She ran and ran, her paws getting sore. Finally, after what felt like half a day, she was only a tail-length from the other cat. With a gasp, she realized now that the orange cat wasn't alone. There was a kit running ahead of her. *I should know that kit.* It was so familiar, but she couldn't put a name to it. She couldn't quite see it clearly, not even the color of its fur or whether it was a tom or a she-kit. As Moonpaw watched, the orange cat butted the kit with her head, hurrying it along, and it gave a short, grumpy mew of protest.

Moonpaw blinked and suddenly, they were the same distance ahead of her as when she'd begun to run. All that running had been for nothing. The orange cat strode on calmly, the kit hurrying ahead of her.

"Stop!" Moonpaw yowled after them. But they kept going. Moonpaw put on even more speed. She had to catch them!

As she ran, her paw caught on something and she almost tripped. She saw that the grass had grown taller and more tangled beneath

her feet. A blade snaked its way around one of her front paws, and she jerked to a stop. Looking back up, she could see the orange cat ahead, exactly as far away as she'd always been, strolling along without looking back. The kit ran in front of her, its shorter tail waving merrily.

More strands of grass were twining around Moonpaw's paws. Steeling herself, she pulled at them, trying to drag herself forward. But the grass wrapped itself more tightly, pulling at her, and she lost her balance, falling, falling. . . .

She slammed into the ground and opened her eyes, gasping for breath. *Where am I?* It had been sunny on the moor, and now there was darkness all around her. The ground was wet and muddy, as though it had been raining. It hadn't been raining on the moor. She blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

Gradually, she recognized the sounds and scents of ThunderClan's camp. She was outside the nursery. How had she gotten here?

"Moonpaw? What do you think you're doing?" She recognized the meow as Daisy's. The cream-colored queen had come out of the bramble thicket that housed the nursery and was staring at her.

Moonpaw scrambled to her paws and opened her mouth, not sure what to say. She had been dreaming, and the dream had seemed important. . . . She tried to remember, but it was slipping away. Trying to catch the memory was like trying to catch water in her paw. There had been a kit, hadn't there? She remembered a grassy moor, and the orange cat, just out of reach. It was all fading.

"Did you hear me, Moonpaw? Why are you creeping around outside the nursery at this time of night?" Daisy's meow was sharper now.

"I . . . I don't know. . . ." Moonpaw wondered if she should recount her dream to Daisy. Maybe the older she-cat would have some words of wisdom. Or maybe she would cuddle up next to Moonpaw and reassure her that dreams were just dreams, and that she had nothing to worry about. It wasn't that long since Moonpaw

had been in the nursery, and Daisy had always known how to comfort her if she woke from a bad dream.

"You should get back to your den," Daisy meowed crisply, and Moonpaw's thoughts of confiding in her melted away. Behind the she-cat, Sunkit was peering out of the nursery entrance, his ears flattened and his tail twitching nervously. His eyes were wide with fright.

Moonpaw felt her whiskers droop. Sunkit had looked at her that way ever since the night when he'd disappeared and she'd found him in the hollow tree. He'd accused her of leading him there in the middle of the night and abandoning him.

She *hadn't*! And every cat knew she hadn't—she'd been asleep in the medicine den, and Jayfeather or Alderheart would have woken if she'd left. Wouldn't they have? She was pretty sure it had been her late littermate, the orange cat, who had led him away, that Sunkit had seen her somehow, even though Moonpaw herself had only ever seen her in reflections, standing behind her.

But a wave of guilt ran through her anyway when she saw the fear in Sunkit's gaze. She didn't want him to be afraid. And if the orange cat had frightened him, wasn't that Moonpaw's fault?

After all, the orange cat was here because of Moonpaw, because they were littermates, and she'd died and Moonpaw had gone on, alive, and left her behind.

There was no way that she could explain any of this to any cat without sounding like she had a brain full of bees.

"I'm just tired is all," she murmured at last. "Maybe I was sleepwalking. Nothing to worry about."

"Go to sleep then, Moonpaw," Daisy meowed with finality, and turned back into the nursery, ushering Sunkit ahead of her.

Moonpaw trudged back to her nest. The apprentices' den was quiet, so at least it didn't seem like she had woken Goldenpaw or Shinepaw. She remembered the fear in Sunkit's gaze and tucked her tail between her legs, feeling miserable. She wished she could reassure him. But she was afraid, too. *What is happening to me?*

When the sky began to lighten, Moonpaw blinked at it blearily from her nest. She'd hardly slept at all once she'd gotten back to her den. Maybe that was all for the best, since apparently she might wake up anywhere. She got to her paws and slipped out of the den without waking the other apprentices.

She went quietly out of camp through the dirtplace tunnel as the sun was rising. On the way back, she decided she'd go to the medicine den and ask Jayfeather and Alderheart if they needed help with any tasks. She might not want to be a medicine-cat apprentice anymore, but she still remembered the different herbs, and she was good at changing nests and tidying up dens. It would be smart to stay busy until Sunbeam was ready to continue her training. The more she did, the less likely it was that she'd hear the voice of the orange cat.

Since her dream last night, she was more determined than ever not to listen.

As she came back into camp, Moonpaw could hear the sounds of her Clanmates waking up.

"Mousewhisker, would you lead the dawn patrol?" Ivypool, the ThunderClan deputy, called, looking over at the warriors emerging from their den. "Take Nightheart, Plumstone, and Stemtail with you."

There was some good-humored grumbling from the warriors she'd named, but they gathered around Mousewhisker and headed out of camp.

Alderheart had come out of the medicine den and was heading for the fresh-kill pile. Moonpaw sped up a little, hoping to intercept him and get him to give her a task rather than face a just-woken-up Jayfeather. She'd learned in her time in the medicine den that Jayfeather was at his grumpiest in the early mornings.

As she passed the nursery, her pelt prickled. Was someone watching her? She turned and saw Daisy and Myrtlebloom, Sunkit's mother. Hesitantly, she flicked her tail in greeting. After a few heartbeats, they nodded to her in response, but their eyes were cold.

Moonpaw ducked her head and walked on, turning toward the apprentices' den. Maybe she didn't want to ask Alderheart for any favors right now. What if Daisy and Myrtlebloom told him they thought something was wrong with Moonpaw?

She couldn't blame them. Of course Myrtlebloom wouldn't be pleased that Moonpaw had been lurking outside the nursery at night with no explanation. Not when Myrtlebloom's three kits were sleeping there. Not after Sunkit had accused her of luring him away from camp. At the time Myrtlebloom had assumed Sunkit was remembering a dream, but she was probably starting to think there was more to the story now that Moonpaw was acting weird. She and Daisy were both probably beginning to wonder if it was true.

Maybe it *was* true. If Moonpaw was walking in her sleep, who knew what else she was doing? Who knew what the orange cat might be making her do?

Perhaps Myrtlebloom and Daisy thought that Moonpaw could be dangerous. Were they right?

Moonpaw shivered. She needed to make sure that what had happened last night never happened again.

But how could she stop herself from sleepwalking? She certainly hadn't meant to do it. And it wasn't as if she could just decide to not sleep. . . .

Or could I?

Chapter 4

"Take a deep breath." Frecklewish used one paw to push gently at Tawnypelt's side. Tawnypelt winced. "That's what I thought. Your ribs are still sore, aren't they?"

"I'm all right," Tawnypelt meowed crossly. Her sides ached, but she didn't want more poppy seeds. She was tired of sleeping her days away.

"One poppy seed now, and another at sunhigh," Frecklewish ordered. "As long as you take several over the course of the day and a couple before you sleep, it should control your pain without knocking you out. You can't heal properly if you don't rest."

"Fine." Tawnypelt gave in. At least the medicine cat was allowing her to take *fewer* poppy seeds. Hopefully that would mean that in the future she wouldn't be as groggy as she had been for the past few days. Spending her time half-awake had become more and more frustrating as she had begun to heal.

Leafstar looked in through the entrance to the medicine den. "How are you feeling, Tawnypelt? Shall I come in and visit?"

Suddenly Tawnypelt was sick of the sight of the medicine den. The sun was shining outside, long rays of light coming through the dogwood bush. "I'll come out to you. That's all right, isn't it?" she asked, turning to Frecklewish.

The medicine cat looked doubtful. "It's a bit cold," she meowed. But at Tawnypelt's pleading expression, she huffed in agreement. "I haven't forgotten what a restless patient you are," she meowed. "I can't say I've missed it, either."

Seasons ago, when Rowanstar had given up his leadership and dissolved ShadowClan, the remaining cats of ShadowClan had joined SkyClan. During her days as a SkyClan cat, Tawnypelt had been cared for several times by the medicine cats here, and she respected them—but had always hated when an injury or illness had kept her in their den. She wasn't a cat who liked lying in her nest.

"I don't like being ill," she retorted as Frecklewish supported her out of the medicine den and onto a sunny patch of withered leaf-fall grass just outside.

"Try not to fall into holes, then," the medicine cat meowed tartly. "Are you comfortable?"

Tawnypelt curled her tail around her back legs. It *was* rather cold, but she wasn't going to admit that after arguing to be let out. "Lovely, thank you." Leafstar came to sit beside her, her whiskers twitching with amusement, and Frecklewish turned back into the medicine den.

"I'm going to sort out some of my herb store," she told them. "Call me if you need anything. And let me know if your ribs start to really hurt, Tawnypelt."

When the medicine cat had retreated, Leafstar sighed. "I'm as restless as you are, Tawnypelt. We've had to put off visiting the Moonpool, and I'm sick of it. I want things to be settled, even though I'm not eager to go to the elders' den."

Tawnypelt watched Leafstar for a moment. The SkyClan leader looked sad, and very tired. Pity filled Tawnypelt's chest, and she wrapped her tail tighter around herself. In her time in SkyClan, she'd come to admire Leafstar as a strong and fair leader, and her Clanmates had seemed devoted to her. What had changed?

Leafstar was older than Tawnypelt, but her coat was still glossy and she looked strong. Her eyes were a little bleary, though—maybe

she was having trouble seeing? Would that be enough for SkyClan to force her out as leader?

"Do you . . ." Tawnypelt hesitated. "Do you *want* to go to the Moonpool and give up your nine lives?" It hadn't seemed that way at the Gathering.

Leafstar gave her pelt a quick, impatient shake. "I want this all to be *over*. SkyClan needs to have one leader, not two, if we're going to be united. Hawkwing is ready."

Tawnypelt nodded. It was true, Hawkwing had always seemed like an ideal deputy: loyal, reliable, and calm in a crisis. He would make a good leader.

"But for more than a quarter moon now, it's been one thing after another," Leafstar went on, waving her tail in annoyance. "It's rained every night, so we haven't been able to go to the Moonpool. Last night, even though it rained, there were breaks in the clouds where the stars and moon showed themselves. I figured we could make it to the Moonpool and wait for our moment."

"You didn't go, though?" Tawnypelt asked.

"The medicine cats wouldn't let me leave camp. They thought the ground was too wet and that I might fall and be hurt on the way to the Moonpool." Leafstar's ears flattened with embarrassment as she explained, "I had a bad fall earlier this leaf-fall. It's one of the reasons my Clanmates have been worried about me."

Tawnypelt gave a short, sympathetic purr. "I don't think ShadowClan's too happy with my fall either."

Leafstar's whiskers twitched. "Yes, I spoke with Tigerstar. He was very clear that he expects you to take more care in the future." The two she-cats exchanged a glance, but Tawnypelt didn't reply. She wasn't going to criticize her son and leader to the leader of another Clan—even though Leafstar clearly understood how irritating it was to be fussed over by younger cats when one was perfectly capable.

They were silent for a moment, and another wave of sympathy welled up in Tawnypelt. "I'm sorry, Leafstar. I know this is hard."

Leafstar sighed. "At least SkyClan has always respected our elders. And I know I can safely leave the Clan in Hawkwing's paws. Things

could be worse. We'll go to the Moonpool tonight, and then, StarClan willing, it will all be settled at last."

The SkyClan leader was dealing with this wisely, Tawnypelt thought. *She could have divided her Clan over whether she should be leader, but instead she's thinking of SkyClan, not herself.* It reminded her of something that Bluestar had told her in her vision: *The eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot.*

Leafstar had a lot of experience and wisdom, Tawnypelt thought. She might be able to help Tawnypelt in figuring out what StarClan wanted from her. Perhaps Leafstar *was* one of the eldest trees, towering above the rest of the forest and able to see more than the younger trees could. Maybe StarClan wanted Tawnypelt to turn to Leafstar for advice. She opened her mouth, ready to ask Leafstar's opinion, then closed it again.

She couldn't ask for Leafstar's help. As a ShadowClan cat, Tawnypelt had a responsibility to talk to her leader, Tigerstar, about the message StarClan had entrusted to her, before telling any cat from another Clan about it.

Maybe she'd been silent for too long, because Leafstar was peering at her curiously. Even though the SkyClan leader's amber eyes were clouded, Tawnypelt felt like she was seeing right through her.

"You look as tired as I feel, Tawnypelt," Leafstar commented at last. "Are you worried that you won't recover from your injuries? Frecklewish and Fidgetflake say you're doing well."

Tawnypelt hesitated, working her claws against the ground. She couldn't tell Leafstar about her vision, no matter how much she wanted to. But maybe she could hint that something was changing? That the Clans would soon face a new challenge?

In her vision, after all, Bluestar had told her: *Tawnypelt, you are the cat who must lead the Clans out of the moonless dark and onto a new path.* That meant *all* the Clans. Leafstar and SkyClan were part of whatever was coming, just as Tawnypelt and ShadowClan were.

"It's just . . . ," she began hesitantly, trying to think of the best wording without giving too much away. "I've had a bad feeling about how things are going between the Clans. I feel like a challenging time is coming." She tried to think of an example. "Like the barriers the Twolegs have built and the den they're making. And whatever terrible thing they're planning for the Moonpool. If we have to move on, we'll need to be united. Not many cats remember our journey to the lake, but I do. And I know you cats of SkyClan had a terrible journey of your own. We must band together despite our different Clans."

She looked at Leafstar, hoping the SkyClan leader, that *eldest tree*, would have some words of wisdom. Leafstar had been listening thoughtfully, but when Tawnypelt paused, she sighed. "I'd like to help you, Tawnypelt. I agree that the Clans should work more closely together. Remember how no other Clan would share prey with SkyClan when our prey was poisoned? But surely you see that SkyClan considers me an elder in all but name now." A shadow passed over her face. "You'll have to talk to Hawkwing. He'll be Hawkstar after we go to the Moonpool tonight."

Tawnypelt was sorry she had asked. She hadn't meant to point out the leader's helplessness in her own Clan. It had been difficult and humiliating for Rowanclaw to give up being leader of ShadowClan, and it had technically been his own choice, although a last resort after ShadowClan had almost been destroyed.

That had been a bitter time for ShadowClan. So many of their Clanmates had died under Darktail. But SkyClan was at peace—it seemed like a pity for Leafstar's leadership to end with her being forced out. "You don't have any second thoughts?" she asked. "You don't want to fight back and keep the leadership? StarClan *chose* you, and you've led them so well for so long. I think the other leaders would support you."

Leafstar shook her head. "I can't lead a Clan that doesn't want me. And the other Clans can't decide for SkyClan. It's more important that we stay strong and united than it is that I stay

leader.” She tipped her head to one side, blinking her amber eyes thoughtfully at Tawnypelt. “If, as you think, hard times are coming, we’ll need our loyalties whole, not divided.”

ShadowClan had been heavily divided by the time Rowanstar became Rowanclaw again. Technically, perhaps Tawnypelt could have claimed nine lives and become leader—leader of a Clan that had ceased to exist.

Later, some of the ShadowClan cats who had returned had asked her to take the nine lives, to start ShadowClan anew. She’d considered it, but once Rowanclaw had died, ShadowClan had been dead to her, too—and it had stayed dead, and the former ShadowClan cats had remained in SkyClan, until Tigerheart returned and gave their Clan new life.

A sharp pang of remembered grief shot through her. No, she couldn’t have led ShadowClan, not then. Not with Rowanclaw so recently dead.

But what if she had tried?

Would I have been a better leader than Tigerstar?

She’d been Tigerstar’s deputy, too, briefly. She’d stepped down because ShadowClan needed to forget their past, needed a new deputy as well as a new leader.

She shifted onto her side, trying to find a more comfortable position, and her ribs twinged with pain.

If she had been leader, she wouldn’t have jumped in and tried to control RiverClan when their leader and deputy had died. Tigerstar had meant well, but that had led to trouble for all five Clans.

Tawnypelt sighed and shut her eyes for a heartbeat. There was no sense in trying to walk in her own past paw steps. What was done was done.

And, overall, Tigerstar was a strong leader for ShadowClan. She doubted that she’d have had the same support he did, not after the way their Clanmates had blamed Rowanstar for what Darktail had done. And she agreed with Leafstar: The most important thing was for a Clan to be united.

Still, the SkyClan leader looked so weary and resigned that Tawnypelt couldn't help feeling sorry for her. It was hard to imagine SkyClan without Leafstar—the leadership of all the other Clans had changed since Tawnypelt had first become a warrior, but Leafstar had always led SkyClan. Tawnypelt opened her mouth to say something supportive—she wasn't sure what—when a polite meow interrupted them.

"Leafstar?" Violetshine, one of SkyClan's warriors, was standing beside them. "The WindClan deputy is at the border, asking to visit Tawnypelt. Should we escort him in?"

Leafstar blinked, looking surprised to be asked. She cast a quick glance around, as if she was searching for Hawkwing, then drew herself up and gave Violetshine a dignified nod. "Bring him in." Violetshine dipped her head in acknowledgment and headed for the camp exit.

Crowfeather. At the thought of seeing the WindClan deputy, an unexpected bubble of excitement rose in Tawnypelt's chest. She hadn't felt this way since she was a young warrior and first began to see Rowanclaw as something more than a Clanmate.

Nonsense. I've known Crowfeather since he was a skinny apprentice and I wasn't much older. We're too old now to start seeing one another in a different way.

The excitement was still there, though, no matter what she told herself. And she remembered what Rowanclaw had told her, tenderly, when they had walked in her dreams together: *I don't want you to be always alone. I want you to be happy.*

Not that she needed Crowfeather to be happy.

Still, as Violetshine and Mintfur led the dark gray tom into SkyClan's camp, Tawnypelt felt herself grow hot with embarrassment. What if he somehow guessed what she had been thinking? But then, why would he? Confused, she lowered her head and lapped at her ruff, hiding her face.

"Tawnypelt?" Crowfeather's meow was pleased, and when she looked up to meet them, his eyes were warm with affection. Immediately, she relaxed. What had she been embarrassed about? She knew Crowfeather too well to be shy around him.

"Hello, Crowfeather. How are you?"

"I'm glad to see you up and out of the medicine den already," he meowed. "I'd heard you were in a bad way." He paused and then added, "I was worried."

Tawnypelt flicked her tail, pleased that Crowfeather had been thinking about her. "I was quite badly hurt," she meowed, "but I'm doing much better now. Fidgetflake and Frecklewish took excellent care of me." Realizing that the conversation was too obviously just between her and Crowfeather, she turned to include Leafstar. "SkyClan's lucky to have such skilled medicine cats. And I'm grateful that Leafstar and her Clan welcomed me."

Crowfeather's ears twitched curiously. "So it's still Leafstar?" His meow was abrupt, but Tawnypelt thought his blue eyes were full of genuine concern for the older cat.

"For now," Leafstar replied, her voice neutral. It was clear to Tawnypelt that Leafstar was too loyal to SkyClan to let the WindClan deputy see if she was upset with her Clanmates. "As soon as we have a clear night to visit the Moonpool, I'll be traveling there with Hawkwing and the medicine cats. Tonight, I hope."

Crowfeather narrowed his eyes. "And that'll be it? Hawkwing becomes Hawkstar and you go off to the elders' den?"

Leafstar stared back at him impassively. "I'm confident that SkyClan will thrive under Hawkwing. And SkyClan doesn't keep its elders shut up; I'll still be part of the Clan."

"Oh, I'm sure Hawkwing will be a good leader," Crowfeather replied. "You taught him well. But it'll take some getting used to for the rest of us."

Leafstar nodded, seeming to relax a little now that she'd made her official position clear. "Change isn't always a bad thing. I'm looking forward to seeing what comes next." She waved her tail toward a spot next to Tawnypelt. "Why don't you sit down and join us?"

Crowfeather nodded his thanks. "I'm sure you'll be an asset to SkyClan even in the elders' den," he commented. "I know WindClan's elders have a lot of wisdom to share with the rest of us."

The eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot, Tawnypelt thought again. It would have been such a relief to relay

Bluestar's words, to confide her worries to these two old friends.

But I can't. My loyalty is to ShadowClan. Tawnypelt suddenly felt terribly tired. Leaving the medicine den had been a lot, and her ribs and head ached. Frecklewish would probably usher her back inside for a rest soon.

She'd done enough for today. But she was getting stronger every day, and soon she'd be able to return to ShadowClan. Once she'd thoroughly discussed her vision with Tigerstar and the ShadowClan medicine cats and gotten Tigerstar's permission to share Bluestar's words with the other Clans, *then* she would be able to talk about her thoughts and fears with the others, and to learn their interpretations of the prophecy.

Until then, I just have to keep quiet. ShadowClan comes first.

I hope it won't be too late.

But as she looked between the SkyClan leader and the WindClan deputy, two cats she knew well and respected, and who she knew respected her in turn, Tawnypelt couldn't help contrasting the pleasure she took in their company with the exasperation she often felt when she dealt with Tigerstar, or with some of the younger warriors of ShadowClan.

It doesn't matter what I feel. ShadowClan comes first.

Chapter 5

Too excited to sit still, Starlingpaw bounced on his paws, then paced from the apprentice den to the warriors' den and back. It was night, and the moon shone overhead, washed clean after so many days of rain.

Usually, SkyClan's camp would be settling down to rest by now, but not tonight. Tonight, Leafstar and Hawkwing, escorted by Fidgetflake, had finally gone to the Moonpool. Leafstar would give up her leadership and Hawkwing would gain his nine lives from StarClan. Every SkyClan warrior was in the clearing, milling about tensely and waiting for them to return. Even Tawnypelt, the ShadowClan cat, was sitting outside the medicine den beside Frecklewish, their eyes on the camp entrance.

The fur along Starlingpaw's back prickled uncomfortably when he looked at Tawnypelt. He hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her about the prophecy yet—the medicine cats didn't let cats who weren't sick just hang around the medicine den—and he felt more and more urgently that he needed to. What was he supposed to do?

"The apprentices ought to go to their nests at least," Gravelnose meowed, interrupting Starlingpaw's thoughts.

"I wouldn't be able to sleep," Starlingpaw's sister, Robinpaw, meowed plaintively. "Please don't make me go, Gravelnose."

Gravelnose and Starlingpaw's mentor, Nectarsong, exchanged a look. "I bet we end up on dawn patrol tomorrow," Nectarsong meowed slowly. "Starlingpaw ought to get some rest. But no other cat will be sleeping. They'd probably just lie awake in their nests."

"Oh, let them stay up," Sunnypelt replied. "They might never see another new leader. It's an important day for SkyClan."

Neither Nectarsong or Gravelnose objected, and, with a pleased flick of her tail, Robinpaw came over and pressed her side against Starlingpaw's. "It'll be weird to start saying Leafdapple instead of Leafstar and Hawkstar instead of Hawkwing, won't it?"

"It seems so strange," Starlingpaw agreed. Leafstar had been SkyClan's leader as long as any cat could remember. It didn't seem fair that the warriors had voted her out, after she'd led them so well for so long.

Time passed and the moon moved higher in the sky. The Clan had been silent for a long while when Harrybrook spoke up. "Shouldn't they be back by now? What if something's happened?"

Reedclaw, who had been the first to call for Leafstar to step down, swished her tail. "What could have happened? Even if Leafstar fell again, Hawkwing and Fidgetflake are there to look after her."

Frecklewish spoke from the shadows outside the medicine den. "From what Echosong told me about Leafstar's nine-lives ceremony, they'll be speaking with StarClan for a while. They won't be home until at least dawn."

"But you don't know for sure," Ridgeglow commented, close beside Birchfeather, the ShadowClan cat who was waiting to join SkyClan. "You've never been to a nine-lives ceremony, and neither has Fidgetflake. Neither of you knows what's going to happen."

Reedclaw sounded annoyed. "This is the way that leaders are replaced while they're alive. It's nothing to be concerned about."

Macgyver shifted uncomfortably. "You talk like replacing a leader is normal. It's not. I know Brambleclaw stepped down and Squirrelstar got her nine lives right away, but when Rowanclaw stopped being leader, he lost his nine lives and no other cat got them until Tigerstar came back."

Tawnypelt's voice came from near the medicine den, sounding hoarse. "Those were special circumstances. There was no ShadowClan to lead until Tigerstar returned."

"I'm just saying," Macgyver went on stubbornly, "we don't know *what's* going to happen. I've heard that, long ago in the forest, ShadowClan drove out their leader, Brokenstar, but the cat they chose to lead them instead, Nightstar, didn't get nine lives from StarClan. I guess they didn't want him to be leader when Brokenstar was still alive."

"I trust in StarClan," Frecklewish meowed soothingly. "And Leafstar has made her choice."

A tense silence fell over the camp again. At first, Starlingpaw's fur was spiking with anticipation. But as time passed, his eyelids began to grow heavy. He leaned sleepily into Robinpaw's side, cushioning his head on her shoulder.

He was almost asleep when, suddenly, Sagenose leaped to his paws. "They're coming! Don't you hear them?"

His ears perked, Starlingpaw staggered upright, along with most of his Clanmates. Now that Sagenose had pointed it out, he could hear soft paw steps coming through the hills toward camp, and, tasting the air, he knew it was the cats they had been waiting for.

"They shouldn't be back yet," Frecklewish meowed, sounding concerned. "I hope everything's okay."

As the three cats walked into camp, Reedclaw began to yowl, "Hawkstar! Hawkstar!" But she and the few cats who had joined her trailed off as they got a look at the tense expressions on the newcomers' faces.

As Fidgetflake opened his mouth to speak, Starlingpaw was already sure of the basic fact he was going to tell them: *Something has gone wrong.*

"Hawkwing hasn't received his nine lives," the medicine cat meowed wearily. "Leafstar is still the leader of SkyClan."

"But why?" Mintfur yowled, asking the question every cat wanted answered.

"Did StarClan refuse to give Hawkwing nine lives?" Tree asked tentatively. Several cats sighed in relief as Fidgetflake shook his head, only to tense again as he went on.

"**S**tarClan did not accept or refuse Hawkwing," he yowled. "We weren't able to reach the Moonpool at all."

Starlingpaw looked around at the older warriors, but they all seemed as confused as he felt.

"What do you mean?" Frecklewish stepped forward to join the others.

"When we got there, the Moonpool was blocked off," Fidgetflake explained. "The pool itself and the waterfall are surrounded by high blue walls, just like the ones around the den the Twolegs are building."

Hawkwing shook his head, looking worried. "We knew the Twolegs were doing something at the Moonpool, but it is much worse than I could have imagined. There wasn't any way to get past the walls."

"We couldn't even see the Moonpool," Leafstar agreed. The leader looked exhausted, half leaning on Hawkwing.

Fidgetflake looked at Frecklewish. "It's far worse than it was when we were there for the half-moon meeting. As well as the walls, there are sleeping monsters guarding it now. Some of them had single arms with long claws growing right out of them."

Starlingpaw shuddered at the description. *Monsters.* And not just racing down the Thunderpath, but guarding the Clans' own Moonpool, keeping them out. A fearful murmur came from his Clanmates.

"The monsters are keeping us from the Moonpool?" Beesting asked. The young SkyClan warrior's eyes were wide. "Don't we *need* the Moonpool?"

Tawnypelt spoke from her spot at the edge of the crowd of SkyClan cats. "The Twolegs who destroyed our forest territories had monsters like that. They use their claws to dig up the earth."

Starlingpaw felt sick. *I've never even seen the Moonpool.* What if it was destroyed? He looked at Tawnypelt, trying to make out her

expression. *Is this the moonless darkness she was talking about?* Maybe "moonless" meant without the Moonpool.

But if that was so, where did the "two-faced cat" come into it? The Moonpool was blocked off because of the Twolegs, wasn't it? He shifted on his paws, anxious and unsettled.

The murmurs of the Clan were getting louder, and Fidgetflake spoke up. "Let's not panic!" he meowed firmly. "It was so dark that we couldn't see how far the blue walls stretched. We'll go back and investigate by daylight, and then we might find it's not so bad. We may still be able to get to the Moonpool."

The black-and-white medicine cat was holding his head high, gazing over the crowd of cats with calm dignity. He looked strong, and his gaze was reassuring as he met each cat's eyes.

He looks like a leader, Starlingpaw thought. *He's acting more like a leader than a medicine cat, isn't he?*

Something about the thought made his pelt tingle. Was Fidgetflake wearing two faces now—the face of a medicine cat and the face of a leader?

Could Fidgetflake *be the "two-faced cat"?* Surely not. Fidgetflake had taken care of SkyClan for seasons, and everyone respected his conscientious skill.

Starlingpaw felt at a loss. If he could just get Tawnypelt alone . . . He moved toward her, meeting her startled green eyes, but before he could reach her, Frecklewish approached and gently encouraged the ShadowClan warrior to lean on him. "You look exhausted," he heard the medicine cat say. "It's time to get some rest." Soon Tawnypelt was hobbling back into the medicine den. There was no way to find out what she thought, or what StarClan might have told her.

Starlingpaw was disappointed, but what had Tawnypelt told him in the medicine-cat den? *You're the only one who can help.* She must have some reason for trusting him with this puzzle. Perhaps StarClan had insisted. And that meant he would have to figure out how that was going to happen by himself, at least for now. If he really could help, maybe SkyClan could begin to forget his responsibility for Kitescratch's death, he thought.

If the "moonless darkness" was related to the Moonpool, then the first place to start to understand it would be *at* the Moonpool. Starlingpaw swallowed hard.

Despite Fidgetflake's reassuring words, Starlingpaw could tell how worried his Clanmates were. In pairs or small groups, most were murmuring to each other quietly, while others stared at their paws or off into the night, deep in thought. Leafstar was sagging more heavily against Hawkwing, her eyes shut, clearly exhausted. Robinpaw nudged Starlingpaw. When he turned to her, she whispered, "This is really bad, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Some cat needs to do something, and I'm pretty sure it has to be me.

By moonhigh, every cat was in their den, except the warriors assigned to watch over the camp.

I can sneak past them, though, Starlingpaw thought. His stomach twisted nervously at the thought. The last time he'd snuck out of camp, his actions had led to Kitescratch's death. *But this is different!* And if Tawnypelt was right, that he was the only one who could help, he had no choice. He could get past Plumwillow and Rabbitleap—or at least he thought he could—but what then?

He could hear Robinpaw's slow, even breathing. She was fast asleep. It was quiet out in camp; most of the Clan must be as well. His nest was so warm and cozy that Starlingpaw was tempted to curl up and let himself sleep too.

I can't. I have a responsibility. I'm the only one who can help. He fluffed his tail and straightened his shoulders. He could be brave.

Very quietly, he crept out of the apprentices' den. Plumwillow and Rabbitleap had their backs to the camp, watching for intruders. The wind was chilly and smelled of frost, and Starlingpaw shivered. But at least he was downwind of the other two cats. Slipping out of camp, he skirted past the dirtplace and headed through the hills in the direction that Leafstar, Hawkwing, and Fidgetflake had come from earlier.

Once he was sure he was out of scenting distance, Starlingpaw cast around to try to find the other cats' scent trail. Even though he was still on territory he knew well, it seemed different in the dark. The trees towered overhead and the stones that marked the slopes near camp were ominous, heavy shapes that took him a few moments to identify.

The cold ground smelled of late leaf-fall: dying plants and fallen leaves, musty mosses and ragged holes where mice and squirrels had dug for their stores of seeds and nuts. Starlingpaw finally located the familiar scents of the SkyClan leader, deputy, and medicine cat. They led straight toward the lake, and then Starlingpaw imagined they would have walked up the stream that ran between ThunderClan's and WindClan's territories to the Moonpool. Starlingpaw knew it would be a long walk, but, with any luck, he should get there while it was still night.

A hoarse call came from overhead and Starlingpaw dropped flat to the ground, his heart pounding. *Was that an owl?* When he was a kit, Beesting had teased him and Robinkit by telling them that owls would snatch them right off their paws, take them away, and eat them if they stepped one paw out of camp at night.

Whatever it was, it must have flown away, because he didn't hear it again. After a few heartbeats, he climbed back to his paws and kept going.

He lost the cats' scent several times, but always picked it up again. *I wish Nectarsong could see how well I'm using my tracking skills.*

He had to rest once or twice and was glad to find a tiny stream of cold, clear water on the way: small enough to leap over, but refreshing to drink.

The moon was heading down the sky by the time he reached the Moonpool. Or, rather, the tall wall that Fidgetflake had described. It went up and up, high above him, flat and smooth and smelling of Twolegs. The Moonpool must be behind this. Starlingpaw picked a direction and started walking, looking for an opening.

Nothing. He kept his eyes on the wall, looking for any change, but there was only that flat expanse.

When he saw his first monster, he froze, hunching to seem as small as possible. It was huge! Just as Fidgetflake had described, one giant arm towered far above its body, its long claws extending into the air. Starlingpaw hadn't realized how tall the monster was, though. *It could swallow me in a single bite!*

He stayed still, barely breathing. Was the monster sleeping? It didn't move at all, and after a long, terrified pause, Starlingpaw took one cautious step farther, pressed against the wall, and then another.

All the monsters seemed to be sleeping. But every time Starlingpaw saw one—some with their claws in the air, others with their claws resting on the ground, some with no claws at all—he stopped, trembling, afraid that *this* time it would wake, would roar like the monsters that raced on the Thunderpath and charge toward him, tearing up the ground with its long claws.

There were so many of them! Probably they could destroy the Moonpool as easily as a cat could dig up a mouse's burrow.

Would StarClan stop that from happening? Starlingpaw wasn't sure.

Finally, he took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. Silverpelt was dimming as the moon moved closer to the horizon. *I'm not going to get through this wall.*

How was he going to work out what Tawnypelt's vision meant if he couldn't get close to the Moonpool, where cats talked with StarClan?

Well. *Medicine* cats talked to StarClan at the Moonpool, and leaders. But Tawnypelt wasn't either of those things. Again, the question bothered him: *Why* had StarClan given Tawnypelt a vision? And why had they chosen Starlingpaw to help her?

His tail drooped. He wasn't going to get an answer here. And he wasn't going to get to the Moonpool tonight. Glancing up at the sky, he winced. It was the silvery gray that came not long before dawn.

He wasn't going to get home unnoticed, either. Maybe, after a scolding, Nectarsong would let him get a little sleep.

He followed his own scent back toward SkyClan territory. His paws were aching, and his head hurt with tiredness and with unanswered questions.

What is the moonless dark?

Why Tawnypelt? Why me?

Who is the two-faced cat?

Starlingpaw was thinking so hard that he didn't pick up the scent of a strange animal until it was too late. Circling around a clump of bushes, he came face-to-face with it and only then noticed the strong, musky smell that made his nose wrinkle. Panic gripped his chest.

The creature was bigger than him, but smaller than some of the dogs he had seen at a distance with their Twolegs. It had thick red fur, a long muzzle, and a bushy tail. Its long ears were perked, and it was stock-still, perhaps as surprised to see him as he was to see it.

Starlingpaw took one more gulp of its terrible scent and realized what the creature was. *A fox!* Whipping around, he bolted away.

Terror made him forget how sore his paw pads were. He could hear the paw steps of the fox pounding after him, and he imagined he could feel it snapping at his tail. *Foxes eat cats!* Impossibly, he put on more speed, but the fox stayed close behind him. Pebbles rolled underfoot as Starlingpaw headed downhill, skidding and nearly falling. He heard more rocks rattling under the fox's steps.

StarClan help me.

He didn't hear the fox anymore, but that didn't mean it had given up the chase. Starlingpaw could feel himself beginning to slow down, his chest burning, his feet sore. He gasped for breath.

There was a strong scent of ThunderClan, and he realized he was crossing their border. The trees were growing more thickly around him, and he scrambled up an oak, sinking his claws into its thick bark.

Can foxes climb trees? Starlingpaw didn't know. He pulled himself up the tree trunk as far as he could and cowered on a branch, feeling sick.

Sniffing, the fox circled the tree and looked up, staring at him and whining. It rested its paws on the trunk of the tree, trying to reach him, but didn't climb. After a few heartbeats, it gave a sharp yap of disappointment and walked away.

Starlingpaw flopped breathlessly along his branch, feeling as if his bones had come loose. For a little while he couldn't move at all. He waited a few heartbeats to see whether the fox would return.

Eventually, he could no longer scent the fox, and he realized he couldn't stay where he was. This was *ThunderClan* territory. What would the dawn patrol do if they found him here? Fight him? Drag him to their camp and keep him prisoner? Punish him for breaking Clan law?

More likely they would laugh at him and escort him home for a scolding. Starlingpaw winced. He remembered the three ThunderClan apprentices he had met at his first Gathering; he really didn't want them to mock him.

Better get going, then. Slowly and painfully, he climbed down the tree and headed back toward SkyClan territory, keeping an eye out for the fox. Climbing the tree so fast had caused him to scrape his paws badly, and they hurt a little more with each step he took.

The sun was just rising over the tree line by the time he limped into camp.

Hawkwing must have just called the dawn patrol, because there were several warriors standing in the middle of camp, and they all turned to stare at him.

"**S**tarlingpaw!" Nectarsong looked horrified. "Where have you been?"

"I . . ." He realized how disheveled he must look—scraped, dirty, and exhausted. No cat would believe he had just gone out for a predawn stroll.

"Did something happen?" Hawkwing sounded concerned.

He couldn't lie. Not to his mentor and his leader. "I went to the Moonpool," he meowed, hanging his head. "I thought I might find something that could help."

"Of all the mouse-brains," Ridgeglow commented.

"What were you thinking?" Nectarsong snapped, her tail bushing with anger. "You could have been hurt or gotten lost. *Never* go off our territory without permission! If something happened, no cat would have known where to look for you!"

Starlingpaw cringed. What would Needleclaw and Robinpaw have thought if he had just never come back? "I'm sorry," he whispered. "And . . . there was a fox. It chased me onto ThunderClan's territory."

The older cats exchanged a look of concern. "I'll send a patrol to ThunderClan to warn them about the fox and explain why you were on their territory," Hawkwing meowed. "Meanwhile, you'd better have Fidgetflake and Frecklewish look you over."

"I'll take him," Nectarsong offered, and she herded Starlingpaw along, scolding him all the way. "I don't know how you could be so reckless. I thought you were a sensible young cat."

Starlingpaw mumbled more apologies. *At least I'm going to the medicine den,* he thought. *Maybe I can talk to Tawnypelt.*

"You're lucky not to have been killed," Nectarsong told him at the entrance. "We'll discuss your punishment later."

She let him hobble into the den alone and turned back to join the dawn patrol.

"I could hear the commotion from here," Fidgetflake meowed as Starlingpaw entered. "Honestly, what were you thinking, Starlingpaw?"

"The Moonpool is a place for medicine cats and leaders, not just any cat," Frecklewish added from where she was mixing a poultice on the other side of the den. "And if Fidgetflake, Leafstar, and Hawkwing couldn't do anything about it being closed off, what did you think *you* would do? You're practically still a kit!"

But I'm special, Starlingpaw thought. *I'm the only one who can help.* He craned his neck to where Tawnypelt seemed to be asleep in her nest.

He took a step toward her and Fidgetflake hissed, "What do you think you're doing?"

Starlingpaw stopped. "Uh. I thought I would say hello."

"Tawnypelt has taken poppy seeds. She is sleeping, and *you* are not here to socialize. Let me see your paws." Starlingpaw sat down so that Fidgetflake could examine his paws, and the medicine cat cleaned them, still muttering between tongue strokes. "Bees in your brain! The apprentices get sillier every season." Finished cleaning, Fidgetflake got up to get herbs, adding, "And stay away from the Moonpool. Like Frecklewish told you, it's not a place for apprentices."

As Fidgetflake huffed off toward the herb store, Starlingpaw thought about this. He'd already known that the Moonpool was a place for medicine cats, but he had never really thought about it before.

Why were the things that went on at the Moonpool so secret? Weren't the medicine cats supposed to tell their Clans everything they learned there?

"What do you do at the Moonpool, anyway?" he asked Fidgetflake, trying to seem casual. "Have you had a vision lately?" If he'd seen something about moonless dark, or a two-faced cat, maybe they could figure things out together.

"Nothing you need to worry about," the medicine cat meowed. "Pay attention to your own duties instead of running off on your own."

Starlingpaw sighed. *He wouldn't tell me even if StarClan did send him a vision.* He glanced at Fidgetflake out of the corner of his eye. Was the medicine cat *hiding* something about what went on at the Moonpool?

Fidgetflake began to chew some herbs. "I'm going to put a mixture of burdock root and chervil on your paws to soothe the cuts and keep them from getting infected," he said. "I don't think you need a poppy seed, but stay off your paws today and let me see them again tomorrow."

"Okay," Starlingpaw meowed. Something bothered him, though. Was it Fidgetflake's mention of poppy seeds? He and Frecklewish

had certainly been giving Tawnypelt plenty. Were they trying to keep her quiet, so she didn't tell anyone about her vision?

Hadn't they been acting strangely, especially Fidgetflake? They'd voted to depose Leafstar, even though they'd been her medicine cats for so long.

He remembered the way that Fidgetflake had spoken to the assembled Clan the previous night; for a moment he had seemed more like a leader than a medicine cat. Was he the one who'd insisted that Hawkwing couldn't become leader without access to the Moonpool?

What if Fidgetflake didn't want SkyClan to have a strong leader? Starlingpaw had heard stories about how RiverClan had been without a leader not too long before he had been born, and how their Clan had almost fallen apart.

Frecklewish hurried into the medicine den, her tail bushed with annoyance. "Fidgetflake, did you give Leafstar chickweed instead of chamomile?"

The younger medicine cat blinked. "Oh, I guess I did. I'm sorry, I was distracted."

Frecklewish snorted. "Well, *that's* not going to do her any good." She searched through the dried herbs and pulled out a few. "I'll give her these, but *pay attention*. It's not like you to make that kind of mistake."

Frecklewish bustled out again, and Fidgetflake stared after her, his face dark with frustration. *"Stupid,"* he hissed softly, as if to himself. Then, more loudly: "Paw out, Starlingpaw."

That was weird, Starlingpaw thought, obediently extending his hurt paw. Why would Fidgetflake give Leafstar the wrong medicine? Couldn't it have hurt her?

What if Fidgetflake was impatient for Leafstar's leadership to end? Surely he wouldn't do anything to hurry things along, would he? He was a medicine cat.

Starlingpaw snuck a look at Fidgetflake as the medicine cat began applying the poultice to his paws. He looked the same as always, quietly intent on healing his Clanmate. He'd been taking care of Starlingpaw since Starlingpaw was a kit.

Could Fidgetflake really be the two-faced cat?

Chapter 6

"What do you think the Gathering is about?" Goldenpaw asked, nudging Shinepaw. "I'm glad we get to go."

"Some kind of emergency, right? It's an *emergency* gathering. Maybe SkyClan's having trouble with their prey again." Shinepaw leaped neatly over a stick in her path.

"I don't think they'd call an emergency meeting for that, not after no cat helped them last time. But Spotfur told me that SkyClan told Squirrelstar there was a fox at our border. Maybe it's about that?" Goldenpaw suggested.

Shinepaw shrugged. "We'll find out soon."

Moonpaw yawned, trying to block out the excited whispering of the other apprentices. She was too tired to care why SkyClan had called an emergency Gathering. She focused on dragging her paws, one in front of the other, until they got to the island, and keeping herself awake once they were there.

She let the sounds around her fade out to just background noise. Vaguely, she was aware of a golden-and-white figure dropping back to walk beside her, but she still jumped at her father's meow of greeting.

"Steady, there," he purred. "Are you feeling all right, Moonpaw? You're lagging behind."

"I'm okay," Moonpaw answered. "Just a little tired, I guess."

Bayshine brushed his tail across her back and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Have you had any more dreams about . . . the other cat?” His eyes had a tender look to them, and Moonpaw’s heart sank. Her parents had been so excited to think that something of her lost littermate survived; she couldn’t tell them how frightening the orange cat was.

“No,” she told him. “Not lately.” To change the subject, she asked, “Do you know what this Gathering is about?”

“I haven’t heard.” Bayshine cocked his head. “The medicine cats look worried, though.”

Moonpaw saw that this was true. Squirrelstar and Ivypool were striding along, leading the Clan to the island, their eyes brightly serious, but Jayfeather and Alderheart, behind them, seemed far more agitated. Alderheart’s fur was spiked along his haunches, while Jayfeather’s gray tail slashed from side to side, his face grim.

“Watch your step now,” Bayshine told her. They had reached the tree that bridged the lakeshore and the island, and Squirrelstar leaped upon it to lead their Clan to the other side. Bayshine dropped back behind the apprentices, watching protectively as the young cats crossed.

“Let’s sit with the WindClan apprentices,” Goldenpaw suggested, and Moonpaw trailed after her denmates as they picked their way through the crowd of warriors below the Great Oak. Settling near some of the young WindClan cats, they watched as Squirrelstar leaped nimbly to sit in the branches of the Oak beside Tigerstar, ShadowClan’s leader, and Icestar, RiverClan’s leader. A heartbeat later, WindClan’s leader, Harestar, joined them.

Shaking off her tiredness as much as she could, Moonpaw resolved to concentrate very hard on this Gathering, the same way she focused on her training. *If I don’t have any attention to give to the orange cat, I won’t be able to hear her.* There was an annoyed grumble in the back of her mind, and Moonpaw very carefully did not listen. The orange cat still spoke to her all the time, but if Moonpaw stopped herself from reacting, it seemed less and less important, and the voice got softer and easier to ignore.

The SkyClan cats, led by Leafstar and Hawkwing, streamed into the clearing last.

Shinepaw leaned over to whisper, "I thought Hawkwing was leader now." Moonpaw shrugged. She recalled that at the previous Gathering, Leafstar had agreed to give up leading SkyClan, but at the time she had been more focused on the orange cat's voice.

"Maybe that's what this Gathering's about?" she whispered back. "Maybe Leafstar decided she wants to stay leader after all."

At the foot of the Great Oak, Leafstar hesitated, glanced at Hawkwing, peered carefully into the tree, then clambered up to sit in its branches beside the other Clan leaders.

"Hawkwing's not joining us?" Tigerstar asked. "Or is it Hawk*star*?" His tail twitched as he stared pointedly between Leafstar in the tree and Hawkwing below.

"Leafstar is still SkyClan's leader," Hawkwing meowed firmly, gazing up from his seat among the Oak's roots with the other deputies.

"For now," Leafstar added. Several of the nearby SkyClan cats shifted uncomfortably at the dry tone of Leafstar's voice.

After a moment, Squirrelstar spoke. "Leafstar, your Clan called this emergency Gathering. Can you explain what's going on?"

Leafstar didn't speak, but waved her tail toward the gathered deputies and medicine cats beneath the tree. Fidgetflake got to his paws, the tip of his tail twitching nervously as every cat looked at him. "Hawkwing, Leafstar, and I traveled to the Moonpool yesterday. We intended to ask StarClan to give Hawkwing nine lives as SkyClan's new leader and allow Leafstar to retire to the elders' den. But when we got there, we found the Moonpool surrounded by those same blue walls the Twolegs have been using where they're building their den near our territory. There was no way to get anywhere near the Moonpool."

A buzz of worried murmurs came from the assembled cats. Climbing to her feet, a ShadowClan warrior yowled, "Does this mean our medicine cats won't be able to share tongues with StarClan?"

Puddleshine, ShadowClan's senior medicine cat, replied, "We trust that StarClan can still contact us in our dreams and by sending signs. But it will be more difficult for us to reach *them*. We've had to cancel the medicine-cat meeting we would have had tomorrow night because we can't get to the Moonpool."

The anxious murmuring grew louder, cats turning to one another to exclaim. Tigerstar, his tail whipping the air, jumped to his paws. "One at a time!" he growled. "Stand up and wait your turn to speak so every cat can hear you!"

He's quite bossy, isn't he? Moonpaw's sister's voice sounded amused.

Moonpaw stiffened. "Shut up!" she hissed, then looked around guiltily, but no cat seemed to have noticed. Resolving once more to shut out the orange cat's voice, she worked her claws against the ground and focused her attention on a silver RiverClan she-cat who had just gotten to her paws.

Icestar nodded to her. "Go ahead, Shimmerpelt."

"Maybe we're getting too worked up about this," Shimmerpelt meowed. "Twolegs are always coming and going. Every greenleaf they're all over our territory, playing in the lake, and then they leave when the weather starts getting cold. Maybe now that it's getting close to leaf-bare, they'll go away?"

"But it was already cold when they put up these walls," Twigbranch argued without waiting for the leaders to call on her. "And how do we know the medicine cats will even be able to get to the Moonpool after the Twolegs take down the walls? They're building a den behind the other walls. What if they're building something around the Moonpool?"

A ginger-and-white ShadowClan warrior who Moonpaw didn't recognize rolled his eyes. "There's no point in worrying about what they're doing behind the wall at this point. Let's figure out how to get past the wall and then we'll know."

Before Squirrelstar or Tigerstar could remind their warriors not to speak out of turn, Crowfeather, the WindClan deputy, shot to his paws. "No point in worrying?" he meowed incredulously. "You younger cats might not know, but this is exactly how the destruction

of our old territory in the forest began. A few Twolegs on our territory, doing something strange. We thought maybe they'd go away. And then *everything* was destroyed. We have to take this seriously."

"Crowfeather." Squirrelstar broke in before he could say more. "*I* remember." They looked at each other for a few heartbeats, and the WindClan deputy seemed to calm a little. She went on, "We will be alert and watch what the Twolegs do. But it's not time to panic yet."

"How can we survive without access to the Moonpool, though?" Alderheart called out, sounding plaintive. "Even if it's only temporary, the Clans *need* the Moonpool."

"Not every cat knows this," Squirrelstar meowed, looking around, "but when we first came to the lake, we had no way to speak to StarClan. Back in the forest we had the Moonstone, a great glowing stone in an underground cave called Mothermouth. But at the lake we had nothing."

Moonpaw's ears perked up in interest. No cat had ever told her this. Looking at her parents and her mentor, she saw they were wide-eyed, as if this was brand-new information to them as well. They had all been born at the lake, she knew, and the forest must seem as distant and long ago to them as it did to her.

"We didn't know if we would be able to stay," Squirrelstar went on. "How could we, if our medicine cats couldn't speak to StarClan? But my sister, Leafpaw, who was only a medicine-cat apprentice at the time, was led by StarClan to discover the Moonpool."

Moonpaw exchanged excited glances with the other young cats around her. An *apprentice* had discovered the Moonpool? It was amazing to think that a cat as inexperienced as Moonpaw herself had done something so important.

"My point," Squirrelstar finished, "is that StarClan will not abandon us. If we are unable to use the Moonpool to communicate with them, they will lead us to find another way."

Icestar volunteered, "When some of us met the wildcats several seasons ago, we learned that they contacted their ancestors through

a hollow tree. There must be other places where we can speak to StarClan besides the Moonpool and the Moonstone."

Ivypool spoke up. "There was a connection between the wildcats' ancestors and StarClan. If we needed to, we might be able to share tongues with StarClan by using the wildcats' tree."

Wow! Moonpaw felt her eyes widening. It would be amazing to see a wildcat. What were they like? Were they much bigger than a warrior? Or did they *act* wild?

But Jayfeather was shaking his head, looking cross. "You were gone for almost a moon on that journey. That's too far for us to travel regularly."

"If all else fails and we have to travel there to contact StarClan," Icestar meowed, "perhaps they will be able to guide us to another place, closer to Clan territory."

Jayfeather hesitated and then, reluctantly, nodded. "I would hope they could guide our steps without any cat having to travel so far, though."

"We'll keep it in mind as a last resort," Tigerstar meowed firmly. "For now we will watch and wait." The other leaders agreed, and the Gathering ended.

As the Clans began to stream out of the clearing, Moonpaw trailed along at the end of the crowd of ThunderClan cats, trying to make sense of what she'd learned at the Gathering. *Moon*stone, *Moon*pool. The next place where the Clans could speak with their ancestors would probably be a moon thing, too. Moons were important.

She found herself holding her head a little higher. The Moonpool had been found by an apprentice, after all, and maybe being named Moonpaw meant she would find the next place. Maybe Bayshine and Thriftear were right and her name and her face made her *special*, in a good way.

She shook her head, shaking off the daydreams. She didn't want to be special, not really. She wanted to be the best warrior she could be, and that was *it*.

And the Clan leaders all seemed strong and smart, confident that they'd find a way to contact StarClan when they needed to. Probably the problem would be solved before newleaf came again.

The orange cat's voice came as sharp and clear as if her littermate were right beside her. *I wouldn't be so sure about that.*

On the way back to camp, Moonpaw concentrated on putting one paw in front of another. Now that the excitement of the Gathering was over, she felt sleepier than ever. She'd managed to stay awake for a couple of nights in a row, but was *not sleeping* really going to work for very long?

Then she thought again of the fear on Sunkit's face. She needed to stay alert, not letting sleep take her. What if, while she was vulnerable, her sister made her do something terrible?

She took another slow step. She was so *tired*. Her eyes drifted almost shut.

"Come on, Moonpaw!"

Moonpaw blinked herself back to full wakefulness. She'd almost fallen asleep on her paws. Goldenpaw and Shinepaw were suddenly on either side of her, even though she'd seen them running ahead when ThunderClan first left the island.

"Did you come back for me?" she asked, suddenly feeling grateful.

"Of course we did," Shinepaw meowed, nudging their sides together. "But you need to get moving before the rest of ThunderClan leaves us behind. We're almost to camp."

"Here comes Sunbeam," Goldenpaw added from her other side. "She'll help us get Moonpaw back to camp."

"I'm *fine*," Moonpaw insisted, and yawned.

But then Sunbeam was in front of her, looking into her eyes. "Are you feeling okay, Moonpaw?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Moonpaw meowed again.

"Well, let's get you back to camp." Sunbeam's gaze was narrow. "Maybe we should have the medicine cats look you over. You seem sick."

"I'm—" *Fine*, she was going to tell them for the third time, but suddenly something rolled underfoot. Her paw went out from under

her and her right leg buckled. A jolt of pain shot through Moonpaw's leg and she yelped as she hit the ground.

"What happened?" Sunbeam asked, her eyes wide.

"Are you all right?" Shinepaw sniffed at Moonpaw's pelt.

"Did you step on something?" Goldenpaw searched the ground below her paws.

"I stepped on a pebble and it rolled under my paw," Moonpaw told them. She tried to get up, but pain rushed through her leg again, and she gritted her teeth. "I think I twisted something. It's hard to walk."

"Oh, no, poor Moonpaw." Sunbeam looked toward the rest of the Clan, but they were almost out of sight. "We need to help you back to camp so Alderheart and Jayfeather can look at it. I don't think I could catch them before they got there." To Goldenpaw, she added, "You get on one side of her, and I'll get on the other, and we can support most of her weight. Shinepaw, you're fast. Run ahead and tell Jayfeather what's happened."

Shinepaw was off with a flick of her black tail, and Sunbeam and Goldenpaw paced on either side of Moonpaw as she hopped along mostly on three paws, trying to keep the hurt one from touching the ground.

When they came through the thorn tunnel into camp, Thriftear and Bayshine rushed up to them. "What happened?" her mother asked.

"Just a twisted ankle," Sunbeam meowed soothingly. "She'll be as good as new by tomorrow, I bet."

All four of them accompanied her to the medicine den, where Shinepaw was waiting outside, looking worried. "I told them you were coming," she reported.

"And all of you can just clear off," Jayfeather meowed briskly, coming out to meet them. "Moonpaw will be fine, and fussing over her and crowding my medicine den won't make her heal faster."

Reluctantly, the others left Moonpaw, and Jayfeather supported her as she limped into the den, where Alderheart was waiting. Jayfeather demanded to know exactly what had happened and, as she told him, sniffed and prodded at her ankle with one paw.

"Feels a bit warm," he told Alderheart, "but not seriously."

"It looks a little swollen," Alderheart observed. "I'll get some twigs to hold it straight so you won't bend it the wrong way while you sleep, Moonpaw. Thank StarClan, it doesn't seem serious. It'll be back to normal in a day or two." As he bustled back to where the medicine cats stored their herbs, he added, "But you look *exhausted*. Are you okay?"

Moonpaw sighed. "I'm fine." Why was everyone asking her that?

"Oh, *are* you?" Jayfeather's voice was dry, and his blind blue eyes seemed to see straight through her. "You just trip over pebbles and fall down when you're fine? Your voice sounds like you're half-asleep when you're fine?"

"I am!" she meowed indignantly. Jayfeather didn't respond, and after a heartbeat she mumbled, "I guess I've been having a little trouble sleeping, that's all."

"We can give you some chamomile to help with that," Alderheart meowed cheerfully over his shoulder, reaching into the herb stores. "Sometimes if apprentices train hard, they're too worked up to sleep at the end of the day."

"No!" Moonpaw yelped. Alderheart stared at her. "I mean, I don't need to sleep," she added.

There was a stretch of silence.

"Give us a moment, Alderheart," Jayfeather requested. Alderheart nodded and slipped out of the medicine den.

Jayfeather's blind gaze rested on Moonpaw for a moment longer, and then he sat down. "Tell me what's going on."

Moonpaw sighed. Could she really trust another cat to understand that she was afraid of what she might do when she was asleep? What if they thought she was dangerous? Even though he was strict and snappish, she'd always felt safe with Jayfeather. "I'm afraid I'll sleepwalk," she confessed. "I've been keeping myself awake since I

woke up outside the nursery a couple of sunrises ago. I don't like the idea of not knowing where I'm going or what I'm doing."

She didn't add that she was beginning to think she might have been the cat who led Sunkit away from camp after all. She didn't want Jayfeather to think less of her. Even with as little as she had told him, her heart beat faster. *What if he figures it out?*

"That's easy enough," Jayfeather meowed briskly. "If you're worried about sleepwalking, you can sleep here."

"I can?" The nest she'd occupied when she'd almost been the medicine-cat apprentice looked so comfortable. . . .

"You need sleep. Keeping yourself awake was a mouse-brained idea," Jayfeather told her. "Alderheart and I will sleep in shifts, taking turns watching over you. We'll stop you if you get out of your nest while you're sleeping. He won't take his eyes off you, and when it's my turn, I can hear and scent well enough that you won't be able to turn over in your nest without me knowing."

Moonpaw went limp with relief. If Jayfeather promised he would do something, he'd do it. "Thank you," she answered in a small voice.

"I want you to sleep here for at least the next quarter moon," Jayfeather ordered. "That will be enough time for us to figure out what's going on."

Jayfeather called Alderheart back into the medicine den, and Moonpaw barely kept herself awake as her ankle was wrapped and she was commanded to eat a dusty-tasting herb. As soon as she could, she hobbled over to her nest and curled up. She'd barely closed her eyes before she was fast asleep.

When she awoke, morning light was streaming into the medicine den. Everything seemed fresh and new, and she felt much better.

"Good morning, Jayfeather," she meowed cheerfully. Jayfeather was sitting up in his own nest, his face turned toward hers. She put a paw out of the nest, and he hissed a warning.

"Don't get up yet," he commanded. "Alderheart's gone to get you some prey, and then we'll see how your ankle is doing."

"It doesn't hurt anymore," she meowed, and it was mostly true; there was just a slight soreness when she moved her paw. But she settled obediently back into her nest.

Jayfeather cocked his head to one side, and again Moonpaw felt as if he could see her clearly despite his blindness. He hesitated for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice had an odd note. "Moonpaw, what did you dream last night?"

"Nothing." It was true—she didn't remember a thing except restful blankness between closing her eyes and opening them again. "Why?"

"There was . . ." He looked worried. "I had the strangest feeling while you and Alderheart were sleeping. It felt as if there was another cat in the medicine den. And I knew it was right beside you. But there wasn't any cat there."

Moonpaw's breath caught in her throat. *The orange cat.* How had Jayfeather sensed her?

Before she could say anything, there was a commotion at the entrance, and Brambleclaw limped in, accompanied by Alderheart.

"What's going on?" Jayfeather asked, immediately turning to the elder. "What've you done to yourself now?" His voice was affectionate, though.

"It's the stupidest thing, but I stepped on something sharp near the dirtplace the other day," Brambleclaw winced. "I'm sure it's not a big deal, but it's feeling worse."

Jayfeather and Alderheart moved quickly to inspect Brambleclaw's paw. *Of course they're worried about him.* Alderheart was Brambleclaw's son, and Moonpaw had heard that he had raised Jayfeather as well.

Jayfeather was indignant. "That's the dirtiest place you could have been cut. You should have come to us immediately."

"I'm afraid it might be infected," Alderheart meowed. "I'll chew up some horsetail to put on it."

With both medicine cats occupied, Moonpaw slowly pulled off the twigs they'd tied around her leg and slid out of her nest. She put some weight on her paw and was glad to find that she could stand without more than a twinge of pain. When Alderheart had his back

to her and Jayfeather was fully absorbed in scolding Brambleclaw, she quietly left the medicine den.

She'd have to go back tonight—Jayfeather was expecting her to sleep there—but maybe he'd have forgotten the strange feeling he'd gotten when he'd been guarding her sleep. She didn't want to talk about it.

Good, the voice in her head piped up. *It's none of Jayfeather's business.*

Chapter 7

"Now arch your back for me and give a little pounce," Frecklewish commanded cheerfully.

Tawnypelt purred with laughter. "I think you just want me to amuse you." But she arched her back, then pounced forward, imagining a mouse beneath her paws. It had been *so* long since she had hunted.

After her paws hit the floor of the medicine den, she turned to Frecklewish with a satisfied flip of her tail. "My ribs don't hurt at all. I feel great."

"We'll be sorry to see you go, Tawnypelt," Fidgetflake meowed warmly. "But I think you're ready to return to ShadowClan."

"Thank StarClan," Tawnypelt replied. "I mean, it's been lovely here and I appreciate all that SkyClan's done for me, but I'm ready to go home."

"I don't blame you," Frecklewish agreed. "There's no place like your own Clan, is there?"

It was true. Tawnypelt might be frustrated by the young warriors in her own camp sometimes, and she'd enjoyed spending time with the cats here, but she was eager to get back to the pines of ShadowClan.

There was a soft scuffle of paws near the medicine-den entrance, and Tawnypelt turned to see a skinny black-and-white apprentice

looking in. She'd noticed him hanging around the medicine den several times before.

"Hello, Starlingpaw," Fidgetflake meowed patiently. "What are you doing here? Don't you have duties to be getting on with?"

The young tom hesitated, his eyes shooting back and forth between Fidgetflake and, for some reason, Tawnypelt herself. "I just thought I could say goodbye."

"To me?" Tawnypelt meowed, startled. "How nice of you. Goodbye, Starlingpaw."

Fidgetflake stepped outside, herding the apprentice with him away from the den entrance and Tawnypelt asked, "Is he a medicine-cat apprentice?"

"No, he just seems interested lately," Frecklewish meowed. "I wonder if he's going to ask how we mix medicines, or about the signs StarClan sends us. Some warriors find what we do fascinating."

"**H**mm," Tawnypelt murmured politely. *She* had never found medicine-cat duties especially interesting. She was glad StarClan had made her a warrior instead.

Outside, Nectarsong came and scolded Starlingpaw about battle practice, leading him out of camp. She must be his mentor.

"My first apprentice was named Starlingpaw, too," Tawnypelt told Frecklewish, remembering an eager ginger tom. "He grew up to be Starlingwing, a good warrior. He died young, though." Sorrow ran through the memories. He'd died in battle, like so many young cats. Seasons ago now, before SkyClan had come to the lake.

She was still thinking fondly of her first apprentice as she settled outside the medicine den in a patch of chilly leaf-bare sunshine. He'd been a little younger than her own kits, and she'd been so excited to have an apprentice and teach him all the things she knew about being a good warrior.

A shadow fell over her, and she looked up to see a cat just a little older than the warrior she was thinking of.

"Birchfeather!" she purred, pleased to see her kin.

Birchfeather dropped the rabbit he was carrying in front of her. "Hi, Tawnypelt," he meowed. "Want to share prey? It would be nice to get a chance to talk again before you head back to ShadowClan."

"Of course, I'd love to." She shuffled over a little to make room for him in the patch of sunlight. "Have Leafstar and Hawkwing mentioned anything about you joining SkyClan since they came back from the Moonpool?"

Birchfeather groaned. "No. It's been another quarter moon, and Hawkwing still just tells me I have to wait for him to become leader, and then—" He broke off, raising his head to stare at the camp entrance.

Tawnypelt followed his gaze. Shadowsight was coming into camp, accompanied by Birchfeather's mother, Dovewing. Dovewing's green eyes were fixed on her son, and she looked terribly sad. She'd been so upset and hurt when her youngest kit had decided to leave ShadowClan, and it seemed like she hadn't yet gotten used to the idea. Birchfeather hunched his shoulders and stared down at his portion of the rabbit.

Shadowsight led the way over as Frecklewish and Fidgetflake came out of the medicine den to greet them. "We've come to see if Tawnypelt's ready to come home." With a glance at his younger brother, he added, "Hi, Birchfeather."

"Hi." Birchfeather looked at Dovewing, who dipped her head.

"Hello." Her meow was stiff. "You weren't with the SkyClan warriors at the emergency Gathering last quarter moon."

"No," Birchfeather shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not a SkyClan warrior yet. They're waiting until Hawkwing is leader to give me my third task."

A new light came into Dovewing's eyes. "You know, if you wanted to come back to ShadowClan, we'd welcome Ridgeglow—"

She clearly had more to say, but Birchfeather interrupted, his fur spiking. "We've talked about this. Ridgeglow and I are going to make

a life together in SkyClan. You can't just demand that I come back every time you see me."

Dovewing's eyes narrowed. "I'm trying to help you," she meowed. "It was so hard to leave ThunderClan, and I don't want you to regret anything. Have you really given this enough thought? It happened so fast."

Birchfeather got to his paws and walked away.

Dovewing's face fell. She closed her eyes as if she was rethinking every word she'd uttered.

She and Tigerstar are going about this all wrong, Tawnypelt thought sadly. She was worried Birchfeather would cut off his ShadowClan kin entirely if his parents kept confronting him.

When she looked up, Dovewing was staring at her. "I know what you're thinking," she meowed. "And you're right. If I can't talk to him without starting a fight, we're going to lose him. But I don't know how to pretend I don't think he's making a huge mistake."

"We both changed Clans," Tawnypelt began. "Maybe if you think about how you followed your heart to ShadowClan, it'll make it easier to understand Birchfeather."

Dovewing gave a dismissive flip of her tail. "Tigerstar and I knew each other—*loved* each other—for seasons and seasons before I made the choice to leave my Clan and my family. I agonized over what I should do. And you left ThunderClan because you thought they'd never accept who your father was. We had real *reasons*. How long has Birchfeather even known this Ridgeglow? It's like he met a pretty she-cat and just walked out." Her voice cracked with grief. "It was *easy* for him."

"I'm sure it wasn't a simple choice. Birchfeather has always made up his mind quickly, but he does think things through," Shadowsight mewed, shifting on his paws, clearly uncomfortable with his mother's emotions.

"Tigerstar and I think he should reconsider," Dovewing meowed stiffly. "He's too young to make this decision, and he hasn't given it enough thought."

"Things will work out—" Tawnypelt began, trying to sound soothing, but Dovewing turned on her.

"I haven't forgotten how *you* encouraged him to leave," she meowed coldly.

"That's not fair," Tawnypelt meowed, the fur along her spine rising. "I encouraged him to follow his heart, but I didn't realize *he* was the one planning to switch Clans." She'd explained this before, but clearly Dovewing was still angry.

Shadowsight cleared his throat, slipping past his mother to prod at Tawnypelt's ribs. "You're not sore here anymore?" he asked awkwardly.

Tawnypelt realized that he, Frecklewish, and Fidgetflake had been waiting patiently while she and Dovewing fought about Birchfeather. And the SkyClan medicine cats weren't even kin, or ShadowClan! Hot with embarrassment, she stammered, "No—no, it's much better."

Frecklewish's eyes were sympathetic. "We gave her poppy seeds for the pain at first, and so she could sleep," she told Shadowsight. "Then we cut back gradually as she got better. She hasn't had any for the last couple of days."

"She's been taking daisy leaf and comfrey to help ease the soreness and to make breathing more comfortable," Fidgetflake added. "I'd recommend she keep up with the comfrey for at least a few more days."

The medicine cats continued to discuss her progress while Tawnypelt and Dovewing waited in silence. At last, Shadowsight nodded and meowed, "She's ready to come home. Puddleshine and I will keep her in the medicine-cat den there for a day or two."

"Ugh, no," Tawnypelt responded automatically, and all three medicine cats purred with laughter.

"We'll miss you, Tawnypelt," Frecklewish meowed warmly.

Tawnypelt thanked both medicine cats, and, with Dovewing, thanked Leafstar and Hawkwing for their hospitality. Leafstar seemed tired, as she had since she had agreed to step down as leader, and Tawnypelt brushed her tail gently against Leafstar's side in silent support. *I wish this weren't happening to her.*

Hawkwing walked them to the edge of camp, chatting cheerfully with Dovewing. As they stopped for a last goodbye, Nectarsong came back into camp, followed by Starlingpaw, who sidled up to Tawnypelt.

"You're *leaving*?" he asked, his voice so soft she could barely hear it over Hawkwing and Dovewing's conversation.

"Oh, yes," Tawnypelt answered, startled again at the apprentice's apparent desire to make conversation with her. "I'm very grateful that SkyClan's put up with me for as long as you have."

Starlingpaw looked around as if worried about being overheard. "I think that Fidgetflake might be the cat you meant," he whispered rapidly. "I'll do everything I can to help you. I, uh, I appreciate your wisdom."

Tawnypelt had no idea what he was talking about. *What a strange little cat.* It was nice that he seemed to think she was wise, though. "Thank you, Starlingpaw." The apprentice was staring as if he wanted to climb right inside her pelt, but Dovewing and Shadowsight were waiting for her now. She meowed a last goodbye to the SkyClan cats around her and they headed off toward home.

By the time they reached the evergreens around ShadowClan's camp, Tawnypelt's chest was aching again. It was a relief to be ushered into the medicine den by Shadowsight, where Pebbleshine immediately examined her just as both Frecklewish and Shadowsight had done.

"I'm honestly fine," she told him, and he nodded.

"Well, we'll keep you in here for a little while to be sure."

Tawnypelt was happy enough to settle into the soft bed of moss and bracken in ShadowClan's medicine den. She breathed in the scent of the dry pine needles on the sandy den floor and felt a purr starting in her chest.

There was a rustle in the thorn tunnel that led into the den, and Lightleap appeared, looking pleased, followed by her kits. Tawnypelt

sat up, her whiskers twitching with delight at seeing her kin.

"Tawnypelt!" Poolkit squealed, and launched herself at her, quickly followed by her littermates.

"Did I get bigger while you've been gone?" Quickkit asked, puffing out his chest.

"I grew more than he did, didn't I, Tawnypelt?" Beechkit insisted, climbing into her nest to cuddle beside her.

Poolkit snorted. "It's better to be fast than big. Tawnypelt, I can run faster than either of them."

"Settle down, kits, Tawnypelt's still getting better, so this is just a short, *calm* visit," Lightleap scolded. Turning her gaze on Tawnypelt, she added, "They missed you, in case you can't tell."

Tawnypelt nuzzled Beechkit's head. "I missed them, too." She felt warm and happy—it was nice to be welcomed back.

Her Clanmates, she realized as the day passed, were making a *point* of welcoming her back. After Lightleap herded the kits away, her littermate Pouncestep stopped by for a chat, with her kits Redpaw and Sprucepaw at her side. Oakfur, Tawnypelt's old mentor and ShadowClan's only current elder, came in to tell her all the gossip she had missed while she was gone, and then Cloverfoot, the Clan deputy, filled her in on their border disputes and petty arguments with the other Clans, before Tawnypelt's two former apprentices, Grassheart and Snaketooth, stuck their heads in to tell her how glad they were to see her back. Cat after cat, from the most senior warriors to young Bloompetal and her littermates, Whisperbreeze, Firbark, and Streamripple, stuck their heads in or stopped by briefly to greet her with obvious affection in their eyes and voices.

Heartbeat by heartbeat, Tawnypelt realized that even though she had felt disregarded by some of the younger warriors lately, they now treated her like a vital part of ShadowClan. *I guess you hunger most for the prey you can't catch,* she thought smugly. *Maybe I should go away more often.*

The sun was most of the way down the sky and both medicine cats were outside the den gathering herbs they'd left out to dry when Tigerstar came into the medicine den carrying a large and juicy-looking frog. "I'm glad you're back, Tawnypelt," he meowed warmly. "Do you want to share prey?"

"I would love to." Warmth bloomed in her chest as she looked at her son, her only surviving kit.

"It's good to see you looking well," Tigerstar went on, pushing the frog toward her so she could take the first bite. "It was frightening to find you so badly hurt."

"I know." Tawnypelt took a bite of the frog, enjoying its sweet, slightly muddy, taste. "I shouldn't have gone to the Twoleg building place without telling anyone. That was stupid of me. Thank StarClan I met Birchfeather on the way."

Tigerstar took his own bite of frog, eyeing Tawnypelt warily. "Did you spend much time with Birchfeather in SkyClan?" he asked.

Tawnypelt sighed. Was this going to turn into her conversation with Dovewing again? "You need to talk to him if you want to stay close to your son."

"I *have*!" Tigerstar growled. "He doesn't listen!"

Tawnypelt shook her head. "I mean actually talk to him, not just snarl at him for his choices. You and Dovewing are pushing him away."

Tigerstar glared at her. "I'll handle my own relationship with my son, thanks," he meowed flatly. "Birchfeather needs to learn that his choices have consequences."

They ate in silence for a few heartbeats. Tawnypelt wanted to argue, but she could tell it would do no good, not now, anyway. If Birchfeather was unlikely to listen to his parents' advice, it was a tendency he'd gotten from his father. As they ate quietly, she saw Tigerstar's gaze soften again. "I don't want to fight," he meowed at last. "I'm so glad you're all right."

"Me too." She'd been waiting to tell him about the vision she'd had, and perhaps this was the time. "Tigerstar, when I fell into that pit, I went to StarClan." Her son froze, his amber eyes fixed on hers.

"While I was there," she went on, "Bluestar gave me a prophecy. She told me I needed to lead the Clans out of the moonless dark and onto a new path." She went on to describe her vision, speaking more quickly as she saw Tigerstar's gaze change from alarm to skepticism. "And, as I left StarClan, she meowed, 'Beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world.' I didn't talk to any cat in SkyClan about this because I wanted you to know first. We should tell the other Clans as soon as possible."

But Tigerstar was shaking his head, puzzled. "Why would StarClan send a message to you instead of a medicine cat?" he asked.

"They told me that *I* was the one that would lead the Clans out of the moonless dark," Tawnypelt repeated. "I'm wondering if they meant something to do with the Moonpool. Maybe I can figure out how the Clans can get to the Moonpool again. Or find another way to reach StarClan. And, you know, StarClan spoke to me directly back in the forest, too, when they sent me and cats from each Clan on the quest to find new territory."

"That was a long time ago. I don't want you going off to the Moonpool the same way you went to the Twoleg building place," Tigerstar argued. "Twolegplaces are dangerous."

"But this is important!" Tawnypelt yowled. She felt like she was trying to wade through mud, frustrated and making little progress. "We've already lost time; we should tell the other Clans *now*. I don't have to go to the Moonpool alone, that's fine."

"Tawnypelt," Tigerstar's voice was sympathetic now. "You were badly hurt and unconscious. Cats dream a lot of strange things when they're injured. And then the medicine cats were giving you so many poppy seeds. . . . When I saw you that first day, you couldn't even speak intelligibly."

Tawnypelt felt her whiskers droop. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe *you* believe it," Tigerstar told her.

"We need to bring the other Clans into this," Tawnypelt insisted. "I understand that it's hard to accept that I have a message from StarClan, but at least if we share it with the medicine cats, they can figure out what it all means. Remember when we've lost contact

with StarClan before? It's always bad. Remember Ashfur possessing Bramblestar? Cats died. *Shadowsight* almost died."

There was pain in Tigerstar's eyes at the reminder, but he growled back. "This isn't the same. StarClan isn't gone; we've just lost access to the Moonpool for now." He shook his head again. "I can't say if you've spoken with StarClan or not, Tawnypelt, but I'm not going to go racing off to the other Clans because you had an ominous dream when you were injured and drugged. If StarClan really wants to reach us, they can speak through the medicine cats."

"But—" Tawnypelt wasn't sure what to say, but Tigerstar went on.

"I'm sure the Twolegs will pull down their barriers now that leaf-bare is coming. Then we'll be able to find out what's really going on and decide whether we should be worried." His gaze softened. "Please just worry about getting better. Leave this to me and the medicine cats."

"Bluestar came to me." Tawnypelt gritted her teeth. "I have to do this."

With a sigh, Tigerstar straightened his shoulders. "I respect you as my mother and as a senior warrior," he meowed. "But I'm your Clan leader, and you need to let me lead here. I'll keep what you've told me in mind, and if the time is right, I'll share it with the others."

"But—" Tawnypelt wanted to argue the point, but Tigerstar fixed her with a firm gaze.

"No. You need to listen to your leader."

Tawnypelt subsided, even though her pelt was prickling with anger. She'd always been a loyal warrior, and she had to obey him. With luck, the time when Tigerstar decided to share with the other Clans would come sooner rather than later. It was clear he wasn't going to listen to her now.

Cool leaf-bare sunlight shone through pine branches, striping the ground with sun and shadow. Tawnypelt padded quietly between the trees, all her senses alert. Still considered injured—although she felt almost back to normal—she hadn't been assigned to any patrols in the three days she'd been back in ShadowClan's territory. But today

Puddleshine had finally agreed that she was well enough to leave camp.

"**D**on't strain yourself," he'd warned. "Just stretch your legs and come back to camp."

She had no intention of *straining herself*, but she hadn't hunted for half a moon, and her claws were itching to sink into some prey. She opened her mouth to scent the air, searching for some sign . . . *there*. A mouse nearby.

Tawnypelt hunkered down, keeping as still as she could, and twitched her ears, listening. The faintest scrabble of tiny claws reached her from beneath some dead moss. Crouching farther, her leg muscles bunching in preparation, she listened until she had pinpointed the exact spot. With a pounce, she landed on the moss, her claws sinking through to the mouse below.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she meowed automatically, and then added, "And it would be nice to get a little more information about what you want me to do." She sank her teeth into the mouse, its sweet blood filling her mouth. She hadn't tasted fresh prey for so long!

It was near sundown when she headed back to camp, a second mouse dangling from her mouth. She felt light and carefree—despite all the trouble hanging over the Clans, despite the Moonpool, it had been good to take some time to hunt.

Back in ShadowClan's camp, she dropped the mouse on the fresh-kill pile. Her steps slowed as she saw a ThunderClan warrior she recognized, Flipclaw, waiting in the clearing, along with a young black she-cat who must be his apprentice. Several ShadowClan warriors were watching them out of the corners of their eyes, and Tigerstar, seated outside his den, was keeping a close watch on them.

"What's going on?" she asked Hopwhisker, who was grooming herself nearby.

Hopwhisker shrugged. "They wanted to talk to you," she meowed. "Tigerstar didn't like it, but he told them they could wait."

As Tawnypelt approached them, Flipclaw got to his paws. "Tawnypelt," he meowed respectfully, dipping his head. "Squirrelstar sent us to ask if you would come to the ThunderClan camp."

"To ThunderClan? Why?" Tawnypelt's heart beat a little faster. Was this what she had asked StarClan for? Perhaps Squirrelstar had also been contacted by StarClan. She and Brambleclaw had gone on that long-ago journey, too. It made sense for StarClan to reach out to them all again. Perhaps Crowfeather would be waiting there as well.

"Brambleclaw's not well." Flipclaw's face was anxious. "He has an infected wound, and he's quite feverish and ill. He asked to see you."

"Oh, no!" How ill was her littermate for Squirrelstar to have sent for her? "Is he dying?"

Flipclaw looked taken aback. "I don't think so," he meowed. "The medicine cats just told us he wants to see you because you're his littermate. He doesn't seem *that* sick."

"Of course I'll come," she meowed.

Tigerstar moved forward, coming between her and the ThunderClan cats. "You just got back from a bad injury and a long stay away," he objected. "You're still ill yourself."

Tawnypelt huffed. "I'm fully recovered. Ask Puddleshine or Shadowsight."

Puddleshine, among the cats in the clearing, spoke up. "She's recovering well, Tigerstar. If she takes it easy, she should be fine for a visit. But maybe you should get a good night's sleep first, Tawnypelt. It'll be dark soon."

Looking at the sun, Tawnypelt saw that it was getting closer to the horizon. Puddleshine had a point—it would be night by the time she got to ThunderClan. "Flipclaw, how ill is Brambleclaw really? Will it make a difference if I come tomorrow morning?"

"No, he's definitely not in immediate danger." Flipclaw looked stunned at the idea. "Should we stay and escort you tomorrow?"

"I'll send cats with her to the border if she insists on going," Tigerstar meowed firmly.

"Tomorrow, then," Tawnypelt meowed. "Tell Brambleclaw I'll head to ThunderClan at dawn."

Chapter 8

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Tallrock for a Clan meeting," Hawkwing yowled.

Starlingpaw, who had been comfortably chatting with his littermate, Robinpaw, after a long afternoon of hunting practice, saw their mentors exchange startled glances as they got to their paws.

"*Hawkwing* is calling the meeting?" Gravelnose asked.

"Maybe he's decided to officially lead the Clan now, instead of waiting for StarClan to give him nine lives," Nectarsong suggested.

Starlingpaw felt a curious mix of excitement and apprehension as he padded after Nectarsong toward the Tallrock. Since he and Robinpaw had been made apprentices, SkyClan's gatherings had been wrenching—his father's vigil, the Clan's vote to demote Leafstar as leader.

"Do you think something's happened?" he asked Robinpaw, and she twitched her tail.

"It could be something good," she meowed. "Don't look so worried."

Ever since Kitescratch died, I've been expecting something else terrible to happen. Maybe that was why he was the cat who could help Tawnypelt: Perhaps if he was watching for something awful no other cat expected, it would help him identify the two-faced cat.

He wasn't sure, though, and the uncertainty ate at him like a shrew nibbling a seed, constant tiny twinges of uneasiness: What did StarClan want him to do?

Neither Hawkwing nor Leafstar was on top of the boulder where the leader usually stood to address the whole Clan. Instead they stood together in front of it as the rest of the Clan approached and settled in a loose semicircle around them. Starlingpaw was near the front, nestled between Nectarsong and Robinpaw.

"I can't see," Starlingpaw heard Mintfur complain from the back of the crowd. "Why isn't Hawkwing on the Tallrock?"

Hawkwing was looking at Leafstar, his dark gray tabby tail switching in exasperation. "*Please* get onto the Tallrock," Starlingpaw heard him hiss softly to Leafstar.

"I'm not really the leader now," Leafstar argued in an undertone. "It's only because of the Twoleg nonsense that you don't already have nine lives. You might as well speak to the Clan."

"It doesn't feel right." Hawkwing looked miserable.

"Together, then," Leafstar suggested. "Because I won't feel right alone, either." She was squinting at Hawkwing, as if she was having trouble making out his features, but at his nod, she turned and leaped nimbly onto the Tallrock.

Hawkwing followed, but one of his rear paws slipped on the edge of the large boulder, and for a moment his claws scrabbled on the rock as if he might fall. Finally he reclaimed his balance and squeezed beside Leafstar at the top of the Tallrock.

T*here's not really enough space for both of them.* SkyClan's leader and deputy looked uncomfortable and off balance.

"What's going on?" Sunnypelt called, and a buzz of questions came from the crowd.

"Did something happen?"

"Is the Moonpool open again?"

Hawkwing glanced at Leafstar, and she blinked back at him calmly. "Go ahead," she meowed.

"Okay, yes." Hawkwing shifted on his paws and seemed about to slip again, but caught himself and straightened up. "As you know, I've been handling a lot of duties as leader since, um . . ."

"Since SkyClan voted to depose me as leader," Leafstar meowed calmly. There was an uncomfortable silence from the cats below. Beside Starlingpaw, Nectarsong stilled and he saw her exchange a guilt-faced glance with Gravelnose.

"Right. And when we thought that I would be leader as soon as the weather cleared and we could get to the Moonpool, that was fine," Hawkwing went on. "But now there are new obstacles, and I'm not willing to take over as leader without StarClan's approval." He glanced at Leafstar again, and she looked away.

Violetshine stood up to yowl, "Does that mean that Leafstar is going to keep on being our leader until Hawkwing gets his nine lives?"

"That's a terrible idea!" Ridgeglow jumped to her paws. "The reasons Leafstar can't lead anymore are still true, even if Hawkwing doesn't have nine lives!"

Leafstar, gazing over the crowd, didn't react. Starlingpaw looked around. Harrybrook, he saw, was staring aghast at Ridgeglow, but other cats were nodding in agreement.

"We need a leader," Macgyver argued. "Don't you all remember how RiverClan fell apart after Mistystar died only a few seasons ago? Without a leader, first ShadowClan tried to take them over and then that maniac Splashtail started killing his own Clanmates."

"Well, that wouldn't happen *here*," Plumwillow told him, wrapping her tail around her paws. "The other four Clans have always struggled over their leadership."

"Don't believe it," Macgyver meowed bitterly. "Any Clan can fall apart."

"Leafstar and I"—Hawkwing looked to Leafstar again, but she merely blinked back at him—"we wanted to bring the Clan together to discuss what we should do. The *last* thing we want is for anything like what happened in RiverClan to happen here, and talking about the possibilities will help prevent that, we hope."

Frecklewish, who, with Fidgetflake, was sitting quite close to Starlingpaw at the front of the group, rose to her paws. "I'm wondering if we need to reconsider our decision," she meowed. "Is the fact that we can't get to the Moonpool to have StarClan approve Hawkwing as leader a sign that they *disapprove*? Maybe StarClan wants us to continue with Leafstar as our leader, as she's always been." A murmur of alarm came from the crowd of cats.

"StarClan has never controlled the actions of Twolegs," Fidgetflake argued. "And, after all, they approved of the changes to the code that made it possible for us to choose Hawkwing to lead us."

The discussion went on, but Starlingpaw let it wash over him as he stared at Fidgetflake. Why was the black-and-white medicine cat so insistent that Leafstar not lead them? Was that why he had given her the wrong herbs, or had it just been a mistake?

He didn't want to think the worst of Fidgetflake. Both medicine cats had looked after Starlingpaw all his life. He remembered Fidgetflake pulling a thorn out of his paw when he was a tiny kit, and how wise and reassuring he had seemed.

When Starlingpaw thought about that, it was hard to believe that Fidgetflake could be the two-faced cat Tawnypelt had warned against. And yet . . . it all *fit*.

Both medicine cats had voted for Leafstar to be deposed as leader, even though they had supported her for season after season. Frecklewish, he had heard, had been a SkyClan medicine cat under Leafstar even as far back as the gorge the Clan had once inhabited. It seemed like a betrayal, like having two faces.

But now Frecklewish was rethinking, and Fidgetflake was even more determined to keep Leafstar from leading them.

Two-faced.

And all medicine cats had their paws in two worlds, didn't they?

He thought back to the things that Tawnypelt had told him in the medicine den, when she was having her vision. She'd said something about *fading stars*, hadn't she? Could that mean Leafstar fading from her importance to the Clan?

Right before the Clan voted to depose Leafstar, she'd been in the medicine den. He'd gone in to take Fidgetflake some prey and saw

him coaxing her into eating poppy seeds.

It had seemed normal at the time. But Fidgetflake had drugged Tawnypelt, too, hadn't he?

He'd told Starlingpaw, before Tawnypelt gave her prophecy: "She's just had some poppy seeds; she won't wake."

Was he trying to weaken them? Keep them quiet? A medicine cat had a lot of power over sick cats.

Was Fidgetflake silencing Leafstar *right now*, in front of the whole Clan?

Indignation swelled in Starlingpaw's chest and he leaped to his paws, unable to hold himself back any longer. "Leafstar's been SkyClan's leader for so long!" he yowled. "She's an honorable cat and she's guided us through so much!" A purr of amusement ran through the crowd, and he started to get hot under his pelt. They thought he was just a young apprentice, practically a kit, didn't they? Robinpaw stiffened beside him.

"I've heard stories about what Leafstar's done for our Clan," he went on, but he could hear his voice wobbling with uncertainty. "I don't think it's fair to just push her out of being leader."

"Starlingpaw, *sit down*," Nectarsong hissed.

But Hawkwing was looking at him gravely. "It's true, we should all honor and respect Leafstar," the deputy meowed.

There was a general murmur of agreement, but Reedclaw growled, "Perhaps, but I'm surprised to hear Starlingpaw say it. Has he forgotten that Leafstar's mistakes caused his father's death? She's not the leader she was."

Starlingpaw sat down abruptly, dry-mouthed and shaking. He couldn't blame Reedclaw, his father's mother, for being angry about Kitescratch's death.

But that wasn't Leafstar's fault; it was mine.

Above his head on the boulder, Leafstar was staring at her paws, clearly guilty and sorrowful. Beside him, Robinpaw was stiff, her fur bristling as she looked up at their leader. She agreed with Reedclaw, clearly.

If I were a better cat, I would tell them who was really responsible for Kitescratch's death.

But Starlingpaw stayed silent.

The discussion went on around him, until Frecklewish finally meowed, "Whatever opinions some warriors hold, Leafstar is still our leader in both StarClan's eyes and the eyes of the other Clans."

"Agreed." Hawkwing sat down, so close to Leafstar on the boulder that their pelts mingled. "I'm happy to take over as much of the day-to-day running of the Clan as I can. But I'm not going to make the decisions that are a leader's to make, not until StarClan has given me its blessing to become that leader. I will continue to follow Leafstar."

There was a low grumble from Reedclaw and some of the cats around her, but no cat spoke up in open opposition. Hawkwing looked at Leafstar, waiting for her to speak.

Leafstar shrugged. "I'm still part of SkyClan, and of course I'll do anything I can for our Clan. But I'm happy for Hawkwing to take the lead as much as he likes, and I hope he'll only turn to me if it's absolutely necessary." Her tail twitched, beating a rhythm against the Tallrock, and she added, "After all, that is what SkyClan decided, and who am I to argue?"

When Hawkwing ended the Clan meeting, the sun was very low in the sky. Robinpaw shook out her pelt crossly and muttered, "I'm going to our den. Are you coming?"

"Soon." Starlingpaw was watching Leafstar heading for the leader's den. *Should I tell her what I think is happening? Would she believe me?*

He waited as the clearing emptied, some cats heading to their dens while others left camp to stroll in the twilight or get in a last hunt. When he was sure no cat was watching him, he got up and hurried after Leafstar. Her den was in a hollow beneath the Tallrock, and he hesitated, not wanting to intrude. "Leafstar?"

Scrabbling sounds came from inside the den, and Leafstar looked out. "Oh, hi, Starlingpaw. Did you need something?"

"I—" Starlingpaw broke off and shuffled his paws against the ground. What could he say to her? *It's not your fault Kitescratch died*? *I think Fidgetflake might be plotting against you*? "I wanted you to know I support you, Leafstar," he meowed at last.

"Thank you, Starlingpaw," Leafstar's voice warmed. "You made that quite clear in the Clan meeting. I'm very grateful to you."

"You don't have to be grateful." His head swam. How could he warn her against Fidgetflake with no proof?

"I do." Leafstar stepped forward and pressed her cheek to his. "You have more cause than most to resent the poor choices I've made. I want to tell you again, I'm so sorry I blamed you for Kitescratch's death. It was unfair and untrue. Any fault there was mine, and it's generous of you to forgive me."

Even if she believes that, she's wrong. Starlingpaw swallowed hard. How could he warn her? "Do you feel like some of the cats in SkyClan might be . . . I don't know, plotting against you? Maybe there's a cat who wanted to make sure you couldn't be leader anymore?" He looked at her quickly, but her face was puzzled. "You had all those poppy seeds . . ." That was as close as he dared go toward accusing Fidgetflake without evidence. Not when he still wasn't sure if Fidgetflake really was the two-faced cat.

"Well, I was quite badly hurt," Leafstar meowed mildly. "No, Starlingpaw, no cat is to blame, and no cat is working against me. We simply disagree about whether I'm still qualified to be leader." She looked terribly sad. "It's nothing for apprentices to worry about. The most important thing of all is to remain loyal to SkyClan, whoever's leading it. And you can trust Hawkwing."

Nothing for apprentices to worry about! After he and Leafstar had bid each other good night, Starlingpaw felt indignant as he padded toward his den. No cat took him seriously because he was so young, but young cats had done great things, he knew it. An apprentice had discovered the Moonpool, after all—Robinpaw had told him so when she'd returned from the emergency Gathering he'd missed because of his sore paws. StarClan trusted him: He was the only one who could help; that's what Tawnypelt had said.

It was frustrating when senior warriors didn’t listen to him. But it didn’t change his mission, Starlingpaw thought, lifting his chin in the air and drawing himself up to his full height. He was going to figure out what the prophecy meant, and he was going to protect Leafstar.

Chapter 9

As quietly as she could, Moonpaw slipped into the medicine den, keeping as low to the ground as if she were stalking a mouse. The bright three-quarters moon was high in the sky, lighting up the camp, and she tried to seem like a shadow in the moonlight.

Over the last quarter moon, she'd been avoiding Jayfeather. Thinking about how he'd sensed the orange cat near her made her pelt prickle with discomfort. She didn't want any cat to know about the voice inside her head. She wanted to be *normal*.

You're being ridiculous, the voice growled grumpily, but Moonpaw ignored it.

She'd taken brief naps around camp when she had a moment, asking Goldenpaw or Shinepaw to wake her if she slept for too long. Her denmates had been puzzled, more so when she didn't come to sleep in the apprentices' den at night, but they'd done as she asked. While she'd expected Jayfeather to scold her and sweep her off to the medicine den—after all, he'd ordered her to sleep there—he hadn't spoken to her about it at all. Maybe he was afraid of what he'd sensed. Or angry at her? He'd noticed something weird about her and the spirit cat that haunted her, she knew that.

But she was *so* tired. That was why she was sneaking back to her nest here: She didn't want Jayfeather to know her secret, but she

trusted him and Alderheart to watch over her while she slept. They'd keep the orange cat from taking over.

Quietly padding across the cool, sandy floor of the medicine den, she looked cautiously around, her heart lifting in relief when she saw that Jayfeather was fast asleep in his own nest. Alderheart was awake, but he merely twitched his ears in greeting. "Hi, Moonpaw. It's been a while. Your nest is ready for you."

Moonpaw ducked her head in nervous thanks. Brambleclaw was in the nest next to hers, his paw wrapped in moss and cobwebs. Doubtless, they held an infection-curing poultice against his wound. She thought his face seemed thinner than it had when he first came in. *Is he getting worse?* Surely a cut paw shouldn't take long to treat. As she climbed into her nest, he opened his eyes, and she saw that they were slightly glazed with fever.

"Hello, Moonpaw," he meowed. "It's good to have some company in here."

"Don't let him fool you," Alderheart meowed affectionately from the other side of the den. "If I didn't keep driving them off so he could rest, there'd be cats in here visiting all day every day."

Moonpaw forced a short purr of laughter. She wasn't quite sure what to say to Brambleclaw; he was such an important cat to ThunderClan, and she hadn't ever had much of a conversation with him before.

Climbing into her nest, she tucked her tail around her paws. "I think it's nice to have company, too," she meowed shyly.

Brambleclaw settled his chin on the edge of his nest with a yawn. "Why are you here, though?" he asked. "You don't seem sick. Are you thinking of apprenticing to the medicine cats again?"

Moonpaw realized that Jayfeather and Alderheart hadn't told any cat—not even Brambleclaw, who'd been in here ever since she'd left while their backs were turned—why she'd been in the medicine den, and she warmed a little with gratitude.

"No, I've been sleepwalking," she meowed, trying to sound casual. "Jayfeather wanted to keep an eye on me to make sure I don't wander off and get hurt."

Brambleclaw nodded sympathetically. "It must be frightening to wake up and find you've been going places without knowing it. I hope the medicine cats can help."

"Thanks." After a moment, she added awkwardly, "I hope they help you feel better soon, too."

"I will feel better, at least in one way. My littermate, Tawnypelt, is coming from ShadowClan to spend some time with me." Brambleclaw looked pleased. "It'll be good to see her. No one understands you like your littermate, no matter how far apart life's paw steps take you."

Moonpaw's shoulders sagged with grief. She wondered if Brambleclaw had forgotten that her only littermate had died when they were tiny kits. Apparently he had, and then remembered, because after a heartbeat he meowed, sounding embarrassed, "Of course, real friends can be just as close at littermates. You're friendly with Goldenpaw and Shinepaw, aren't you?"

They were his kin, Moonpaw remembered. Their father was his daughter's son. "We're friends," she agreed, then added, "But I do wish I had a littermate sometimes."

Do you? The voice in her head was mocking.

***I** mean a* real *littermate. One who was an apprentice with me and was doing what I do. Now be quiet.* Moonpaw pulled her attention away from the voice before she heard more than a sulky huff from the orange cat.

The moss and bracken of Moonpaw's nest were soft, and she felt herself drifting toward sleep. She was only half aware of Alderheart occasionally moving past her to Brambleclaw's nest, bringing him herbs for pain and infection, and cool water to drink.

The next time she opened her eyes, the moonlight that shone into the medicine den was dimmer. Time had passed.

"Moonpaw," Brambleclaw whispered hoarsely. She rolled onto her side so that she could see him more clearly. The elder's eyes were glassier than before, maybe with fever, or with the herbs Alderheart had given him.

"What?" she replied, blinking. She was so tired, she felt like she was talking to him from a long way away.

"Do you dream when you sleepwalk?" he asked, his words a little slurred with drowsiness.

Moonpaw thought of her dream of chasing after the other cat and how she'd woken outside the nursery. "Yes. I think that's why it happens."

"I've been . . . having bad dreams lately." Brambleclaw flexed his injured foot, then winced. "I've dreamed of when I was in the Dark Forest."

The Place of No Stars. Moonpaw shivered. Older warriors whispered to each other about the place where evil Clan cats went after death—somewhere with no prey, no dawn or night, only a lingering constant twilight without stars—but she had never been quite sure that it was real. She'd heard that a long-dead warrior had taken over Brambleclaw's body, back when he had been Bramble*star*, their leader. The warrior had imprisoned Bramblestar in the Dark Forest. The older cats didn't like to frighten the kits and apprentices with the story, but she'd asked her mother once.

"Thriftear told me about it," she whispered. Brambleclaw cocked his head, blinking at her blearily. "That an evil cat took over your body and sent you to the Dark Forest."

Brambleclaw closed his eyes for a few heartbeats. When he opened them again, they shone with anger. "His name was *Ashfur*," he spat. "He wanted power and he wanted Squirrelstar. But the Clans defeated him at last."

Another shiver ran through Moonpaw. "What did it feel like?" she asked. "Having another cat in your body?" *Maybe that's what's wrong with me. Maybe an evil cat has taken over my body.* The darkness around her felt more frightening suddenly, as if something terrifying could be lurking close beside her.

The voice inside her head snorted. *Not likely. If I'd taken over, I would have caught more prey today.*

I was tired! Moonpaw snapped inside her mind. Then she shook her head a little. She wasn't going to respond. She was ignoring the voice, she reminded herself. And if Brambleclaw's experience had been anything like hers, maybe he would have some ideas on how to make the orange cat go away.

She thought at first that Brambleclaw wasn't going to answer. But after a long pause, he meowed slowly, "It felt like nothing at all."

"What do you mean?" Moonpaw felt the prickle of fur rising nervously along her spine.

"I was just there, outside my body, watching." Brambleclaw's eyelids were drooping with exhaustion, but his voice was bitter. "I watched the impostor speak to my Clanmates and sleep beside my mate and hunt with my claws, and I couldn't do a thing. No cat could see me. And all the time"—he took a deep, hoarse breath—"I could feel the Dark Forest enveloping me. I was being swept away. I lost time. . . . I would be watching my body and then days would have passed without me knowing."

Pity sank its sharp claws into Moonpaw's heart. Brambleclaw must have suffered terribly. No wonder he had stepped down and given the leadership of ThunderClan to Squirrelstar after that!

But she was, she realized, a bit disappointed, too. This wasn't the answer to what was wrong with her. Ashfur's taking over Brambleclaw's body didn't sound anything like what she'd been experiencing.

"How did you get rid of Ashfur?" she asked, even though she was almost sure that knowing the answer wouldn't help her silence the orange cat.

"We had to fight him in the Dark Forest," Brambleclaw told her. "He had an army of evil ghosts on his side, but spirit cats fought alongside us." His eyelids were drooping, and his meow was half a mumble. "Good cats died."

Well, that wouldn't work, Moonpaw thought. *I've got no idea how to get to the Dark Forest. And I don't think that's where she comes from, anyway.*

Her littermate was mischievous, but Moonpaw didn't think she was as evil as the cats that had been sent to the Place of No Stars. And she'd been only a tiny kit when she'd died. No kit was bad enough to go to the Dark Forest.

Moonpaw's eyes were getting heavier and heavier, and she felt them drift closed. She jerked herself back to consciousness and looked around the dim medicine den. "Brambleclaw?" she whispered. "I'm afraid of falling asleep."

There was a long silence from the other nest and, for a heartbeat, Moonpaw thought that Brambleclaw was already sleeping. But then a tired mumble came. "Me too. I worry I'll end up in the Dark Forest again."

It's okay, Moonpaw told herself. *Alderheart is awake in his nest. He won't let me sleepwalk. And Brambleclaw will be fine. He's just tired and ill.*

Despite herself, her eyes drifted shut again. It would be all right, she reminded herself. She was in the medicine den. Alderheart would watch over her.

"Come on, come on, come and play with me."

Moonpaw blinked her eyes open again. She was still in the medicine den, but the sun was shining. The orange cat stood with her front paws on the side of Moonpaw's nest, gazing impatiently at her.

Startled to see the orange cat at her side instead of in a reflection behind her, Moonpaw sat up and looked around. Jayfeather and Alderheart weren't there; not even their nests were there. That side of the medicine den had a tiny pool, water running down the side of the cave to fill it, cracks in the rock walls stuffed with sharp-smelling herbs, and that was all. "What did you do with them?" she meowed, alarmed.

The orange cat rolled her eyes, eyes as green as the eye on the orange half of Moonpaw's own face. "I didn't do anything. This is *your* dream, mouse-brain."

"Dream?" Doubtful, Moonpaw prodded the side of her nest. It seemed pretty solid. She looked down at her paws, which appeared like they always did. How did you know when you were in a dream?

"Yes! Do you want to play? We could pretend to be badgers, or chase moss balls!"

"I'm too old for that," Moonpaw meowed automatically. Those were all fun ways to play, but she, Goldenpaw, and Shinepaw had agreed that now that they were apprentices, they should be having fun on *real* hunts and battle practice, not playing kit games.

"That's not fair." The orange cat's tail drooped, and she glared at Moonpaw. "I never have any fun. You won't even talk to me anymore."

Behind her, something was solidifying, something that hadn't been there before. Moonpaw craned her head, looking past her sister. It was a tidy nest of moss and bracken and, in it, a large, dark brown tabby tom sitting up, his amber gaze puzzled. "Brambleclaw?"

"Brambleclaw!" The orange cat turned and stared with delight at the former ThunderClan leader. With a flick of her tail, she was clambering into the nest beside him.

"Wait!" Moonpaw's heart was pounding. What was the other cat up to?

The orange cat shot her a look of disdain. "I'm not going to *hurt* him." Leaning against Brambleclaw's shoulder, she whispered something in his ear. He looked at her in surprise.

"What are you saying to him?" Moonpaw stood up in her own nest, ready to defend Brambleclaw. But the den floor between them seemed to stretch endlessly, uncrossable.

With a short *mrrow* of amusement, the orange cat whispered in Brambleclaw's ear again.

"Leave him alone!" Moonpaw yowled at her. Why would the orange cat bother Brambleclaw? He was sick! And no cat except Moonpaw was supposed to be able to speak with her littermate

anyway. Had the other cat lured Sunkit out of camp like this, whispering quietly in his ear? Just what was she planning now?

"I'm not doing anything!" the orange cat hissed back. "Just because you don't want to talk to me doesn't mean no one else can!"

"Yes, it does!" Moonpaw growled. "And if this is a dream, it's *my* dream. So I'm going to wake up."

"It's not fair!" the orange cat yowled again, but Moonpaw ignored her. Slamming her eyes shut and gritting her teeth, she thought, *Wake up. Wake up. You're dreaming. Wake up.*

Carefully, she opened her eyes again. At first she wasn't sure if it had worked. She was still in her nest in the medicine den, and the sun was still shining through the brambles that covered the den entrance, throwing a pattern of sunshine and shadow on the sandy floor.

But this time Jayfeather was there, standing near her nest. "So you came back at last," he meowed crisply. "I can tell you that you didn't sleepwalk last night. Did you have bad dreams?"

"Not bad, exactly," Moonpaw meowed. It was a comfort to have the no-nonsense gray tabby near her. She couldn't imagine a spirit cat getting the better of *him*. "Just strange."

Jayfeather bent his head to sniff at her. "You smell healthy enough," he told her. "I'm sure Sunbeam is eager to rush you off for battle practice or some kind of training, but stay here and keep an eye on Brambleclaw for a moment."

"I'm okay," Brambleclaw protested from behind him. "I'm happy for Moonpaw's company, but I can manage alone for a little while if she needs to go meet her mentor."

"Nevertheless, I'm not leaving you here by yourself," Jayfeather meowed crisply. "Alderheart's gone to settle Fernstripe into the nursery. She needs a few days to get comfortable there before her kits come. I am going to the fresh-kill pile to fetch you some prey. And Moonpaw is going to keep you company until I return."

Moonpaw nodded quickly. "Of course, Jayfeather." Behind her, she could hear Brambleclaw muttering his own agreement. Squirrelstar might be the leader of ThunderClan, but in the medicine den, Jayfeather's word was law.

When Jayfeather left, she turned to Brambleclaw. "How are you feeling today?" she asked. Now that they were in the light of day, their sleepy confidences of the night before felt like they had happened to some other cat. Once again, she wasn't sure how to talk to the former Clan leader.

Brambleclaw stared at her, a strange expression in his eyes. "I'm feeling all right," he meowed slowly. "Still feverish, I'm afraid, but no worse than yesterday. Do you . . ." He hesitated.

Moonpaw's pelt itched uncomfortably under his intense gaze. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

Brambleclaw gave his head a short, sharp shake. "I'm sorry, Moonpaw. I'm just distracted. You were in my dream last night, and it felt so real. I'm still waking up, I guess."

Something twisted uneasily in Moonpaw's stomach. "I was in your dream? What did you dream?"

"We were right here in the medicine den," Brambleclaw told her. He looked off into the distance, trying to remember. "You and I were both in our nests, but there was another cat here. A young orange she-cat, apprentice-aged. About your size. You and she were arguing, and she climbed into my nest and started whispering in my ear."

Moonpaw's heart beat harder. How could Brambleclaw have shared her dream? "What—what did she whisper?"

Brambleclaw shifted uncomfortably. "She told me that she was glad I had a fever and kept dozing off, because it meant she could reach me. She said that she wanted me to stay between worlds with her. She wished I would stay all the time. I probably dreamed it because it seems like I've been sick for so many days already."

Moonpaw felt the fur along her spine stiffen. Brambleclaw had seen the other cat, the one who only existed in Moonpaw's head? And she

had wanted him to stay with her?

"A strange dream, right?" Brambleclaw meowed. "I guess other cats' dreams always seem strange."

"Sure." Moonpaw heard herself give an unconvincing short purr of laughter. "You should hear some of my dreams sometime. You'd think I had bees in my brain."

Her mouth was dry and her head was spinning. What did it all mean? It was bad enough that the orange cat wouldn't leave Moonpaw alone, but what did she want with Brambleclaw?

Brambleclaw kept on talking to her, chatting gently about the changing weather and what Sunbeam had taught her so far, and she answered without really paying attention. But as soon as Jayfeather returned, a starling dangling from his mouth, she was on her paws. Mumbling that she'd better go meet Sunbeam, she headed out of the medicine den. The sun was too bright, and she felt like she couldn't breathe. Was Brambleclaw in danger? Had she drawn the orange cat's attention to him when she talked to him about her dreams?

Leave Brambleclaw alone, she thought angrily, thinking of the orange cat. *He's not* your *Clanmate.*

Chapter 10

"You don't need to wait with me," Tawnypelt firmly told the two warriors beside her. "Go on with your patrol. I'll be fine until the ThunderClan cats come."

Snaketooth and Fringewhisker exchanged uneasy glances. "Tigerstar told us to stay with you at the border until your escort came from ThunderClan," Snaketooth meowed.

Tawnypelt shot Snaketooth a stern look. The younger tabby had once been her apprentice—seasons ago, now—and she wasn't about to be ordered around by her. If Tawnypelt started letting her Clanmates treat her like she needed special care, she'd lose their respect for good. "I'm perfectly capable of standing at the border by myself."

Snaketooth shifted on her paws. "I know, but you've been ill and Tigerstar said—"

Tawnypelt arched her back, letting the fur spike on her shoulders. "It's not necessary."

"Maybe we can just start patrolling a little way along the border? We'll be close enough to hear if Tawnypelt needs anything." Fringewhisker looked back and forth between them nervously. "That would be okay, wouldn't it?"

Tawnypelt let her fur settle. "I suppose." She watched as the other she-cats continued along the border, stopping to scent-mark trees.

Snaketooth was dragging her paws and glancing back at Tawnypelt, clearly reluctant to leave her behind.

Before her Clanmates had gotten out of sight, Tawnypelt heard the ThunderClan cats coming through the underbrush. Flipclaw and his apprentice were meeting her again, she saw, this time accompanied by Lionblaze.

"How's Brambleclaw today?" she asked after they'd exchanged greetings. She'd tried not to worry that having waited an extra night to come might mean that he would be worse.

"The same," Lionblaze meowed. "He sleeps a lot. He seems mostly okay when he's not sleeping, though."

Could be worse, right? Tawnypelt thought uneasily. She didn't know much about illness. "Brambleclaw's always been strong, thank StarClan."

Crossing ThunderClan's territory, she noticed it felt colder than ShadowClan's, already heading into leaf-bare. The almost-leafless oaks and birch trees didn't block the late leaf-fall wind the way ShadowClan's evergreens did. But the crunch of leaves and bracken underpaw and the smells—squirrels and dry leaves and ThunderClan scent—were reassuringly familiar. Tawnypelt took a deep breath, opening her mouth to taste the air. The scents here took her back to the ThunderClan of her kithood, in the forest territories many seasons ago.

As soon as they came into ThunderClan's camp, she headed straight for the medicine den. Pushing aside the brambles at the entrance, she peered into the shallow cave. Jayfeather got to his paws and came forward to meet her. "He's sleeping," he whispered. "Let's talk outside."

First, Tawnypelt took a long look at Brambleclaw, curled in his nest. She didn't like his appearance at all. He looked thin and feverish, and his sides moved quickly, his breathing shallow and ragged.

She followed as Jayfeather led her away from the medicine den, admiring the confidence with which the blind cat crossed the clearing. When she saw him at Gatherings, he moved almost as smoothly, but she had noticed Alderheart guiding him subtly with his

tail to warn him of obstacles. Here, it seemed he knew every paw step of the camp with total accuracy.

When he turned to face her, she spoke first. "He doesn't look good. How sick is he?"

Jayfeather sighed. "He's got a serious cut on his paw, and we haven't been able to stop the infection from spreading up his leg. It's sapping his strength, but he's still lucid and in no immediate danger. All we can do is keep trying to treat it and make sure that he gets plenty of rest."

"Will he be okay?" Tawnypelt asked, her chest tightening with worry. She might not know much about medicine, but she knew that an infection the medicine cats couldn't stop was bad.

"We're doing our best," Jayfeather answered. "We have hope that he can defeat the infection."

Tawnypelt heard what Jayfeather was carefully not saying: Brambleclaw might die if the infection went unchecked. Part of her wanted to spit at the medicine cat, warn him to try harder to heal her littermate. She knew, though, that he and Alderheart loved Brambleclaw, who had raised them both as his sons, and were already doing all they could. Scolding Jayfeather wouldn't help. "Go back and keep an eye on him, then," she meowed. "Don't worry about me. I'll amuse myself."

Jayfeather dipped his head. "I'll let you know when he wakes."

As he headed for the medicine den, Tawnypelt looked around the ThunderClan camp. Finleap and his skinny black apprentice, along with a couple of other warriors and their apprentices, were heading out of camp again. One of the warriors was Sunbeam, who had once been part of ShadowClan. She waved her tail to Tawnypelt in greeting and Tawnypelt nodded in response. Sunbeam's apprentice was smaller than the others and, as she glanced back into camp, Tawnypelt noticed that her face was unusual, black on one side and orange tabby on the other.

Peculiar, she thought. She'd never seen a cat quite like that before. The little cat's divided face was kind of pretty, though.

Alderheart came out of the nursery and nodded to Tawnypelt as he headed back to the medicine den. Three kits, watched over by

Myrtlebloom and Daisy, were tumbling in the clearing nearby.

"Oakkit, you're cheating!" a little she-kit shrilled, and flung herself at one of her littermates.

"Only play battles, Hazelkit," Myrtlebloom warned, tugging the kits apart. Tawnypelt purred in amusement as she padded past them.

Cloudtail and Brightheart were sharing tongues near the elders' den. "Hello, Tawnypelt," Cloudtail meowed cheerfully, and Brightheart twitched her ears in a friendly greeting.

"You've come to see Brambleclaw?" she asked, and Tawnypelt nodded.

"He's still sleeping, so I haven't spoken to him yet."

"What does Jayfeather say? He and Alderheart haven't told us anything." Cloudtail's blue eyes were shining with concern. When Tawnypelt repeated what Jayfeather had told her, he shook his head, worried. "He's always been strong, but he's changed since he escaped the Dark Forest."

"I know," Tawnypelt agreed. Her littermate had seemed smaller after his terrible ordeal, and she knew that he had frozen under the pressures of leadership where once he would have thrived. He'd been reluctant to make the decisions a leader had to make, the ones that shaped their Clan. "We have a lot to blame Ashfur for."

"He's been happier since he came to the elders' den," Brightheart assured her. "Not carrying the weight of being responsible for the whole Clan has made things easier."

"He's young to be an elder, though," Cloudtail commented. "Maybe he should have become a warrior again instead."

Brightheart brushed her tail across his side teasingly. "He's not that young," she meowed. With a glance at Tawnypelt, she added. "No offense, but you two were kits when we were apprentices. You're only a few moons younger than we are."

It feels like more, Tawnypelt thought. Brightpaw and Cloudpaw had seemed impressive and capable when she was a kit, apprentices to admire. Together, they had brought Brightpaw back from her terrible injury, showing that even with only one eye, she could still be a powerful warrior. And now they were elders lolling in the

sunshine. She couldn't imagine wanting that life—she intended to serve her Clan as a warrior for a long time still.

"Maybe we shouldn't have retired to the elders' den when we did, though," Cloudtail responded, as if hearing Tawnypelt's thought. "These younger cats are good enough warriors, but they don't understand all that the Clans have gone through. Do you know, Squirrelstar is the only leader now who remembers our old territories in the forest? None of the others took the long journey to come here."

Tawnypelt realized that he was right. She had never thought about it before. Leafstar was the oldest leader, but SkyClan had never lived in the forest. And all the others, even Icestar, had been born by the lake.

"Those things shaped the Clans," Brightheart agreed somberly, letting her chin rest on her paws. "Sometimes I worry that once all the cats who remember are gone, the Clans might repeat their worst mistakes."

A chill went through Tawnypelt. *That's what I'm afraid of.* The younger cats, the ones who hadn't lived through the destruction of the forest territories and the loss of the Moonstone, didn't truly understand the destruction Twolegs could bring down upon the Clans.

She remembered what Bluestar had told her. *The oldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot.* Were Cloudtail and Brightheart two of the cats to whom Bluestar's prophecy referred? Was this a sign that Tawnypelt needed to push harder to get Tigerstar to share her vision with the other Clans? The leaders *must* worry more about what the Twolegs might be doing. What if the Clans lost their territories once again?

"Tawnypelt!"

Tawnypelt looked out to see Squirrelstar hurrying toward her from the leader's den. Nodding a goodbye to the two elders, she crossed the clearing to meet her.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you," Squirrelstar meowed. "Have you visited Brambleclaw yet? He's been eager to see you."

"He was sleeping when I got here, but Jayfeather's going to let me know when he wakes up," Tawnypelt told her.

She was thinking of what Cloudtail and Brightheart had said. Squirrelstar was the only leader who truly had experienced the devastation that Twolegs could bring.

The ThunderClan leader was still talking, asking about Tawnypelt's time in SkyClan, but Tawnypelt interrupted. "Squirrelstar," she meowed abruptly, "I know the leaders decided at the Gathering to wait and see, but what do you really think about what the Twolegs are doing at the Moonpool?"

Squirrelstar's green eyes rounded. For a heartbeat, Tawnypelt saw the impulsive young apprentice who had traveled with her to find the Clans' new home, so long ago. "I'm so worried," she breathed. "No cat seems to realize that the Twolegs could do *anything*. And if we lose the Moonpool, we can't stay here."

"No, we can't, can we?" Tawnypelt meowed, dismayed. She hadn't followed the thought all the way through until now. "We need StarClan so that we can choose our leaders, and to guide our medicine cats. Without the Moonpool to give us a place to reach them, we wouldn't be Clans at all."

Squirrelstar shivered. "Maybe Icestar and Ivypool are right, though. Maybe we can find another way for our medicine cats to share tongues with StarClan, without having to leave the lake. But if we don't get to the Moonpool soon, I'm going to insist we send patrols to look for that other way. This is too important for us to waste time."

Relief rushed through Tawnypelt. *At last* a leader was taking this problem as seriously as she was.

W*hat if I told her about Bluestar's prophecy?*

Tawnypelt ached to tell Squirrelstar about her vision—Squirrelstar would listen, she knew, and take her seriously. *Not like Tigerstar.* She took a deep breath.

"What is it?" Squirrelstar asked.

Tawnypelt hesitated. She couldn't tell Squirrelstar, not without Tigerstar's permission. She was a loyal ShadowClan cat, and her leader's word ought to be law to her. "Nothing," she meowed.

Surely Tigerstar will let me share what Bluestar told me soon. She would talk to him again when she got back to ShadowClan.

Squirrelstar seemed about to speak when Jayfeather emerged from the medicine den. "Brambleclaw's woken up and is asking for you, Tawnypelt."

The medicine den was dimmer than the clearing, and it took a heartbeat for Tawnypelt's eyes to adjust. Brambleclaw looked thin and his eyes were feverishly bright, but he was sitting up and purring at the sight of her.

"So, you're lazing around in your nest while the rest of ThunderClan works?" she meowed jokingly. "We'd never put up with this in ShadowClan."

Brambleclaw gave a sleepy *mrrow* of laughter. "Sounds terrible. I've always known I wasn't a ShadowClan cat." He shifted over, and Tawnypelt climbed into the nest beside him, pressing their pelts together. Brambleclaw's side felt too warm, hot with fever.

"This reminds me of when we were kits," he meowed. "Remember when we decided to stay awake all night and kept kicking each other whenever it looked like one of us was going to doze off? Goldenflower got so annoyed, she made us sleep on either side of her for the next quarter moon."

"That was funny." Tawnypelt could tell that Brambleclaw was sleepy, even though he'd just woken up. He was heavy against her side.

"You were a good littermate." He yawned and added softly, "I missed you when you left."

"I know." Tawnypelt pressed her shoulder against his. "I missed you, too."

"When we traveled together to find a new territory, I enjoyed myself, even though it was such a serious journey. It was good to have the same purpose and spend every day together." Brambleclaw

turned his head to look into her eyes. "Did you ever regret it? Leaving ThunderClan?"

Tawnypelt tried to choose the right words. "I left ThunderClan because no one there trusted me—trusted *us*—because of who our father was." The first Tigerstar had lied and murdered in his quest for power, and ThunderClan had been wary of his kits and slow to accept them, even though they'd been born in the Clan. "Even though ShadowClan was at war with the other Clans, they accepted me. They *kept* accepting me, even after the first Tigerstar was dead and gone. And if I hadn't changed Clans, I never would have fallen in love with Rowanclaw. I never would have had my kits."

"You ended up where you belonged," Brambleclaw agreed. "But it was hard to be left behind. ThunderClan didn't trust me either then."

"I don't regret going to ShadowClan," Tawnypelt told him. "But I am sorry we ended up in different Clans."

Brambleclaw sighed, tucking his tail around his paws, and changed the subject. "I'm so tired," he complained. "But I don't want to sleep yet. I have weird dreams."

"Like what?" Tawnypelt's heart quickened. Maybe Brambleclaw had dreamed of Bluestar, too. Seasons ago, StarClan had come to both of them and sent them on a quest together. Perhaps they had both been given this prophecy as well. If so, at last she would be able to discuss it with another cat—talk it over with Brambleclaw—without betraying her loyalty to Tigerstar.

"Last night I dreamed about one of the apprentices," he told her. "She was arguing with another cat, one I didn't know, and then that cat kept telling me she wanted me to stay between worlds with her."

Between worlds? It was clear Brambleclaw hadn't had the same vision that she had, but this sounded related. Bluestar had warned against "the two-faced cat with one paw in each world." Was this dream cat the one with a paw in two worlds? Was Brambleclaw?

It probably didn't mean anything, she told herself, flicking her tail. Cats dreamed all sorts of things when they had a fever.

Still . . .

"Which apprentice was it?" she asked. "One of Nightheart and Sunbeam's kits?"

"No, this was Thriftear and Bayshine's kit. Sunbeam is her mentor," Brambleclaw told her. "You must have noticed her at a Gathering. A little she-cat with an unusual face."

"Oh. Yes, I've seen her." Did the apprentice's divided face indicate that *she* was the cat with a paw in two worlds? There were too many possibilities, Tawnypelt thought, frustrated.

"She sleeps in the medicine den sometimes, so I've gotten to know her a bit," Brambleclaw meowed.

"Is she ill?" Tawnypelt asked, and Brambleclaw shook his head.

"She sleepwalks. The medicine cats like to keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't hurt herself."

Is sleepwalking having a paw in two worlds? For a heartbeat, Tawnypelt was tempted once more to reveal Bluestar's words. But instead she curled closer to her littermate.

When I get back to ShadowClan, I'll make *Tigerstar listen to me.*

The sun was low in the sky when Tawnypelt crossed the border and headed toward ShadowClan's camp. Her worry over Brambleclaw weighed her down, making her feel as if her pelt was heavy with rain. They'd spoken more about their shared kithood, and gossiped cozily about Clanmates and kin, but he had tired quickly, almost dozing off several times in the middle of a sentence, until he finally fell asleep entirely.

He'll get better, she told herself grimly, and wondered if she was lying to herself.

Still, she couldn't think about that now. The prophecy Bluestar had given her was too important for her to wait any longer. Surely she could make Tigerstar listen, especially if she told him about Brambleclaw's dream.

Tawnypelt paused for a moment beneath a pine tree, working her claws thoughtfully against the boggy ground. Should she mention Moonpaw? She had an odd, divided face, and Brambleclaw had dreamed about her, but the apprentice hadn't actually done anything wrong. Did Tawnypelt want to draw the ShadowClan leader's

attention to the young cat, warning him she could be the two-faced cat that StarClan had told them to beware?

That didn't seem fair.

I won't tell him. Not without some kind of proof.

Tawnypelt knew what it was like to be an apprentice and have older warriors turn against her for something that wasn't her fault. It had driven her away from the Clan of her birth. She wasn't going to put Moonpaw through that.

I'll try to keep an eye on her myself, she resolved. *Just in case.*

Back in ShadowClan's camp, she brushed aside her Clanmates' greetings and questions about Brambleclaw's health and stalked over to Tigerstar. "I need to speak to you and Cloverfoot," she meowed. "The medicine cats, too."

"Did something happen?" Tigerstar asked, alarmed.

"It's important we speak alone, the five of us. Please."

Tawnypelt waited until all five cats were crammed into Tigerstar's den. It was more than roomy enough as a den, but five cats were a few too many to sit comfortably. Tigerstar was squeezed between the ShadowClan deputy, Cloverfoot, and the senior medicine cat, Puddleshine, while Tawnypelt could feel Shadowsight's side pressed too tightly against her own.

"We're private enough now," Tigerstar meowed. "What's going on?"

"It's about the prophecy that Bluestar gave me," Tawnypelt told him, and Tigerstar growled in frustration.

"We've talked about this. I'll take this to the other leaders when I'm sure that it's the right thing to do. Yowling at me about it isn't going to change my mind."

He looked likely to walk straight out of his den, and Tawnypelt shifted to block him. "But Brambleclaw told me something today that might be related." Quickly, she told Cloverfoot and the medicine cats about the prophecy Bluestar had given her, adding, "I just learned Brambleclaw has been dreaming about a strange young cat who wants him to 'stay between worlds' with her. Maybe the cat he's dreaming of is the two-faced cat with one paw in each world that Bluestar told me to beware."

Cloverfoot cocked her head doubtfully. "Sounds like a coincidence to me. How do you know what you saw was a prophecy and not just a dream?"

"It *wasn't*. It wasn't anything like a dream. I've spoken to StarClan before." Her heart sank at the hesitation in the other cats' faces. "We need to tell the other Clans' leaders and medicine cats about this. What Bluestar told me—we need to lead the Clans onto a *new path* out of a *moonless dark*. It sounds urgent. Don't you think it might have to do with what's happening with the Moonpool?"

"What do you think, Puddleshine?" Tigerstar asked.

The brown tom's tail twitched as he thought. "I agree we shouldn't discount any message from StarClan. But I don't understand why StarClan would come to Tawnypelt with this prophecy instead of a medicine cat."

The fur rose along Tawnypelt's spine. "StarClan has come to me before!" she snapped. "Have you forgotten that they sent me—and other *warriors*, not medicine cats—on a quest when the forest was about to be destroyed?"

"But that was to send you—*specifically you*—on a journey," Puddleshine responded. "They had a reason to come to you and no one else. Did Bluestar give you a reason this time?"

Tawnypelt hesitated. "She told me I need to help lead the Clans out of the moonless dark and on a different path."

"That's not very specific, though, is it?" Puddleshine went on. "I understand that you believe this is a prophecy, but you were hurt and delirious after your accident. Dreams can feel very real." He blinked at her sympathetically. "I'm not saying it's not a real prophecy. I don't know. I *wish* we could get to the Moonpool and get some kind of confirmation from StarClan."

Shadowsight, who had been looking uneasily between the other cats, spoke up. "I think we should be careful about believing unquestioningly in a prophecy given to just one cat. We know there have been false messages in the past."

Tawnypelt bristled again and was about to yowl when she caught the miserable expression in Shadowsight's eyes. *Of course he's afraid.* Ashfur had done just that to him: sent false messages that had led to Shadowsight treating Bramblestar's illness in a way that caused him to lose a life, let Ashfur into his body, and bring disaster on all the Clans.

"I know Bluestar. I recognized her," she meowed gently. "It's not the same as what happened to you, I promise."

"Enough." Tigerstar broke in. "Tawnypelt, my opinion hasn't changed. We're going to wait for something more to happen before we discuss this with the other Clans, or even with the rest of ShadowClan."

"But—" Tawnypelt's fur bristled.

"No." Tigerstar's voice was flat. "Moving too quickly has hurt ShadowClan in the past, whether it was believing the messages Ashfur sent or taking over RiverClan. I take responsibility for those mistakes, and I'm the one who makes the decisions. We're going to keep quiet, and wait and see."

Chapter 11

"Hawkwing says you and Robinpaw can come to the full-moon Gathering tonight," Nectarsong told Starlingpaw on their way back from patrolling SkyClan's borders.

"Great!" Starlingpaw leaped over a tiny stream, his paws feeling as light as dandelion fluff. The only Gathering he'd been to before had been so much fun; it had been interesting to meet cats from other Clans, and the moment when Leafstar had announced him and Robinpaw as new apprentices had been one of the best of his life so far. He puffed out his chest in pride as he thought of all the cats at the Gathering yowling their names. He'd been disappointed not to get to go to the emergency Gathering a quarter moon ago.

As soon as they came back into camp, he went looking for Robinpaw to tell her. He knew that she was back from hunting, because Gravelnose was in the clearing, eating some of the prey they'd brought back. But Robinpaw wasn't there. She wasn't with Needleclaw, either; he could see their mother near the warriors' den, sharing prey with Violetshine.

He found her at last in the apprentices' den. She was lying in her nest, turned away from the entrance, her reddish-brown back somehow managing to look unwelcoming. He hesitated, wondering if she was asleep.

"What." She didn't turn to look at him.

"Are you sick?" Starlingpaw asked, puzzled. "Should I get Frecklewish?"

Robinpaw rolled over to face him and sat up. Her whiskers were drooping and she looked terribly sad. "No, I'm all right," she meowed. "I was thinking of Kitescratch. Gravelnose was showing me different pouncing techniques, and it reminded me of how Kitescratch used to wiggle his tail and let us practice pouncing on it when we were kits. I just miss him, you know? He loved us so much."

"I know. I know he did." Starlingpaw had a sudden, vivid image of the terror on Kitescratch's face when he'd flung himself between Starlingpaw and Leafstar. Starlingpaw had made a deadly, foolish mistake, and Kitescratch had saved him. "Remember how proud he was when we became apprentices?" he meowed, his throat dry.

Robinpaw's gaze warmed. "He said he expected us to do something extraordinary when we were warriors, because we were the best new apprentices he'd ever seen."

The littermates were silent for a few heartbeats, and Starlingpaw felt like their shared memories of their father were filling the den. This time it didn't hurt quite so much.

"Nectarsong told me we're going to the Gathering tonight," he told Robinpaw, hoping she'd be as pleased by the news as he was, but her eyes narrowed as her face soured.

"I hope you're not planning to make a fool of yourself by jumping up to defend *Leafstar* like you did at the Clan meeting," she snapped.

"I didn't make a fool of myself," Starlingpaw objected, stung. "I think it's horrible the way the Clan is treating Leafstar. She's our leader."

"Our leader?" Robinpaw growled. "It was her fault Kitescratch died. How can you stand up for her?"

Shocked, Starlingpaw staggered backward a step. "*Her* fault?" he meowed numbly. "It wasn't Leafstar's fault. It was mine. If I hadn't followed them to the badger fight, Kitescratch would still be alive." *Everyone knows that.* Again he saw Kitescratch rushing forward to

save him, his attention pulled away from the badger for that crucial moment.

Robinpaw's eyes rounded with alarm. "Oh, no, Starlingpaw," she meowed. "It wasn't your fault. I don't blame you, and neither does Needleclaw. Never."

Starlingpaw swallowed hard. *Maybe you* should *blame me.* But he was afraid to say it.

The rest of the day, it felt like he was carrying a heavy stone in his belly. He was still excited to go to the Gathering, but his happiness was all mixed up with grief and regret.

The only way he could make amends for Kitescratch's death, he reminded himself, was to figure out what the special job was that StarClan—and Tawnypelt—had for him. *I'm going to keep trying to figure it out,* he resolved. *I've been wasting too much time just being an apprentice.*

At twilight Hawkwing called the Clan together to travel to the Gathering, Leafstar standing quietly at his side. The leader and deputy exchanged awkward looks as each waited for the other to lead the way and finally set out side by side. The medicine cats followed directly behind them, and Starlingpaw stared at Fidgetflake, wishing he could see inside the medicine cat's black-and-white head. Was he plotting something? Or was he blameless? How was Starlingpaw ever going to figure out if Fidgetflake was the two-faced cat Leafstar had warned about? Fidgetflake glanced backward, looking along the line of SkyClan cats, and Starlingpaw instinctively flinched. *Maybe I'll get a chance to talk to Tawnypelt tonight,* he thought. *She can tell me what I'm looking for.*

Starlingpaw and Robinpaw followed their mentors, near the end of the line of warriors. The full moon was rising as SkyClan crossed the hills and valleys of their territory and was high overhead by the time they reached the tree-bridge to the island.

On the island, they picked their way through the groups of cats already settled in the clearing, waiting for the Gathering to begin. Starlingpaw looked for Tawnypelt, but it didn't seem like the

ShadowClan cats had arrived yet. Tigerstar was not among the leaders in the tree as Leafstar reluctantly climbed up to join Harestar and Icestar. ThunderClan hadn't arrived yet either.

"There are those WindClan apprentices we met last time," Robinpaw meowed. "Let's sit with them."

Starlingpaw recognized the two young toms—Silkypaw and Fluffpaw, he recalled—apprentices a few moons older than they were. "Hi," he meowed. "Can we sit here?"

Silkypaw waved his tail in greeting as both WindClan apprentices shifted over to make room for the two younger cats. "How's your training going so far?" he asked. "My first moon as an apprentice, Songleap had me run and run across the moor until my legs ached every night."

"And that's why WindClan cats are the fastest," Fluffpaw finished smugly.

"We've been working really hard," Robinpaw told them. "Gravelnose has been teaching me pounces and leaps. You know that SkyClan cats are the best jumpers."

"How about you, Starlingpaw?" Fluffpaw asked. His whiskers twitched playfully. "Are you the *very best* at jumping, too?"

"I got chased by a fox," Starlingpaw blurted out. "That's why I couldn't go to the emergency Gathering. I hurt my paws running away."

Silkypaw and Fluffpaw exchanged a startled glance.

"Really?" Silkypaw asked.

Starlingpaw tucked his paws beneath him. "I got away. That's why SkyClan cats are the *best.*" Kitescratch would have loved that answer, Starlingpaw thought. He would have been purring with laughter; he thought it was hilarious when his kits were cheeky.

Fluffpaw, his pelt fluffing more than ever, seemed about to reply when ShadowClan cats, followed by ThunderClan, began streaming into the clearing. All four apprentices called out greetings as the three ThunderClan apprentices who had been introduced at the same meeting as Starlingpaw and Robinpaw sat down near them. Shinepaw, Goldenpaw, and Moonpaw, he remembered.

Starlingpaw strained his neck trying to see over the heads of the other cats. Was Tawnypelt here? Did he have time before the meeting to report to her and tell her what he'd been thinking about the two-faced cat? He finally spotted her among a group of senior warriors on the other side of the clearing and tried to catch her eye.

Should I get up and talk to her? He started to get to his paws, then changed his mind. What did he have to tell her? Only vague suspicions of Fidgetflake. Nothing important enough to justify making his way through the whole crowd of cats just as the Gathering began. He would find her afterward.

Turning back to watch Squirrelstar leap into the branches of the Great Oak, he noticed a fourth cat sitting among the ThunderClan apprentices in front of him and wondered how he had missed her before. She was small and orange, nestled quite close to Moonpaw's side. Had she been introduced at the emergency Gathering he hadn't gone to? Or was she a brand-new apprentice whose name would be announced tonight?

He was about to introduce himself and ask her name when Harestar stepped forward on his branch and yowled, "Let the Gathering begin." Obediently, Starlingpaw settled down among the other apprentices.

"Prey is running well in WindClan," Harestar announced. "The recent rains led to the medicine den filling with mud, but with the help of our apprentices, Fluffpaw and Silkypaw, Kestrelflight and Whistlebreeze were able to save our herb stores."

The two WindClan apprentices exchanged pleased glances at their leaders' praise.

Starlingpaw listened quietly as Icestar and then Tigerstar reported on the happenings in RiverClan and in ShadowClan. Leafstar seemed reluctant to step forward and address the Clans, looking down at Hawkwing among the deputies before beginning to speak.

"SkyClan's difficulties with our prey have improved," she meowed. "Hawkwing and our warriors have been able to find prey that was not affected by the Twoleg poison, at least for now. I'd like to thank

RiverClan for their fishing lessons, even if it's not our preferred prey." A murmur of laughter swept through the clearing, and Icestar nodded graciously at Leafstar's thanks. "And . . ." She looked to Hawkwing again. "Obviously, we have not yet been able to name Hawkwing as our leader."

"How is that working?" Tigerstar asked curiously. "Does SkyClan find it difficult to follow two leaders?"

"Until StarClan approves the change, Leafstar is our only leader," Hawkwing yowled from his seat below the Great Oak.

"Hawkwing and I have always worked well together," Leafstar answered coolly. "Everything is going well in SkyClan."

Mind your own business, Tigerstar. Starlingpaw had heard SkyClan warriors say that the ShadowClan leader thought he should be in charge of every cat around the lake, and now he was seeing it for himself.

While Starlingpaw fumed over Tigerstar's words, he missed Squirrelstar's first announcements. But then she meowed, "SkyClan warned us about a fox that had crossed onto ThunderClan territory, and we tracked it until we were sure it had left the Clan territories entirely." At that, Starlingpaw sat up straight and returned the glances Silkypaw and Fluffpaw shot him. *See, it was true!*

"It's important that we talk about a problem that affects us all," Squirrelstar meowed, and Starlingpaw returned his attention to the ThunderClan leader. "The Clans need access to the Moonpool."

"Nothing's changed since the last time we discussed this," Tigerstar commented. "Didn't we decide then to wait and see?"

"That's just the problem," Squirrelstar answered. "The Twoleg barrier is still blocking our access to the Moonpool. We can't just sit and wait until they decide to move it."

Frostdawn, the younger RiverClan medicine cat, got to her paws. "Exactly! We need to be able to share tongues with StarClan. Look at what happened with our Clan a few seasons ago. Look at what's happening in SkyClan now. If the Clans aren't able to turn to

StarClan for advice, there can be terrible consequences. This is urgent!”

“It seems like SkyClan is keeping their heads and managing well,” Mothwing, the older RiverClan medicine cat, meowed from beside her. “There’s no immediate emergency, and I think we should proceed with caution.”

“If we can’t get to the Moonpool, we need to find another way for the medicine cats to speak with StarClan,” Squirrelstar meowed firmly.

“I propose that we send a patrol to the Tribe of Rushing Water,” Crowfeather yowled from his place among the deputies. “Feathertail, who traveled with us from the forest looking for a new home, lost her life there. She walks in both StarClan and their Tribe of Endless Hunting. Perhaps we can speak to her and, through her, to StarClan and find out what we should do about the Moonpool.”

Tribe of Endless Hunting? Is that another kind of StarClan? Starlingpaw had never heard of such a thing. He was about to nudge Robinpaw to share his amazement when his attention was caught by the orange ThunderClan apprentice in front of them. Goldenpaw, Shinepaw, and Moonpaw were all listening quietly to the discussion, but the orange apprentice had gotten up and was wandering around the clearing.

As he watched, she darted toward one of the senior ThunderClan warriors, a large golden tom, and flicked her tail across his nose, then bounced away a few paw steps, waiting for his reaction. The tom ignored her. The small orange she-cat turned her back on him and began to weave her way between warriors, then leaped lightly over a black WindClan she-cat with a stern face.

She’s going to get in so much trouble. Starlingpaw couldn’t even imagine what Nectarsong would do if he started behaving like that at a Gathering, in front of all the other Clans. Probably he’d get told off by Hawkwing and Leafstar as well.

But none of the other warriors reacted to the orange apprentice at all. The black cat didn’t even blink as the apprentice darted away. Next she wriggled her way back between the apprentices and seemed to whisper something in Moonpaw’s ear.

For a heartbeat it seemed like Moonpaw might have heard her. Her ear twitched and an annoyed expression passed over her divided face. But then she settled again, without glancing at the orange apprentice.

As the orange cat dashed away again, Starlingpaw's gaze stayed on Moonpaw's face. It was odd, the way it was split between orange tabby and black, almost as if she were two different cats. Was *that* what Tawnypelt had meant by *beware the two-faced cat with a paw in each world*? Was Moonpaw dangerous? He wondered how he could learn more about her.

A ShadowClan warrior, a calico she-cat, got to her paws. "I don't think it makes sense to send a patrol to the mountains just when leaf-bare is coming," she meowed, and Starlingpaw glanced toward her, then stopped and stared. Beside the calico ShadowClan cat, the orange apprentice stood, her tail flicking when the calico cat's tail flicked, her head cocked at the same angle. "Racing off to other cats just in case they can tell us something about StarClan seems as foolish as chasing my own tail," the calico cat meowed, and the apprentice mouthed the words in time with her.

Couldn't the calico cat see her? Wasn't anyone going to make this rude cat stop?

"This is so weird," he murmured to Robinpaw.

"What is?" she whispered back.

"Shh!" Gravelnose shushed them.

Starlingpaw looked back at the orange apprentice just as the calico cat sat back down. The orange cat glanced down at her and suddenly was gone.

"Shush!" Gravelnose meowed again at Starlingpaw's gasp. But Starlingpaw, looking around wildly, barely heard him. Where had the other apprentice gone? He hadn't taken his eyes off her, and now she was nowhere to be seen!

Very quietly, Robinpaw whispered, "What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Starlingpaw shook his head and looked straight ahead, pretending to pay attention to the Gathering. *A ghost? Could that have been a spirit cat?*

The idea seemed mouse-brained. Except he had heard cats say, more than once, that his mother's brother and father, Rootspring and Tree, could see the spirits of cats who had died. They'd talked to them, even.

Was the orange apprentice a ghost? Can I *see ghosts?* Starlingpaw realized that he was breathing hard, as if he'd been running. He had to do something. Casting a look around the clearing, he spotted Tree a little way behind him, close to the edge of the crowd. Had he seen the orange apprentice as well? Getting to his feet, Starlingpaw wove his way quietly between the gathered cats, trying to look as if he desperately needed a drink of water or had another valid reason to get up.

When he sat down beside Tree, the older warrior glanced at him warmly, but didn't speak.

What should I say? Starlingpaw cleared his throat and whispered. "Tree? Did you see that apprentice who was running around?"

Tree shook his head. "Shush."

Starlingpaw tried to whisper even more quietly, "I think she was from ThunderClan. She was trying to distract other cats, I think, but . . ." He wasn't sure how to describe what had happened.

"Apprentices are always acting up," Tree meowed quietly. "Not you and Robinpaw, of course. My kin are always delightful and perfect in every way. Don't worry about it. ThunderClan can discipline its own apprentices." He flicked his tail dismissively. "She'll be picking ticks off elders for a quarter moon, no doubt."

"It wasn't just that she was acting up . . . ," Starlingpaw murmured. Before he could explain, Tree laid his tail across Starlingpaw's back.

"You should be quiet now before Nectarsong hears you," he warned affectionately. "You don't want to be the one picking ticks."

With a sigh, Starlingpaw let his shoulders slump. Clearly, now was not the time.

Maybe he could ask Tree or Rootspring later, when they were back in SkyClan. But what exactly would he say? That he had lost sight of a naughty apprentice?

I don't even know if the rumors about Rootspring and Tree seeing spirits are true. They'd certainly never done anything of the kind since he had known them.

And I've never seen anything like that before.

There was probably a perfectly natural explanation. The orange apprentice had dodged out of sight, and Starlingpaw would look like he had bees in his brain if he told anyone what he had seen.

I probably didn't see anything at all.

Chapter 12

O*h, how fun, another Gathering! I wonder what's going terribly wrong today!*

Moonpaw ignored her littermate's taunting voice, instead staring straight at the Great Oak, trying to follow the discussion between the Clans.

She was so tired. The night when she'd slept in the medicine den had kept her going for a while, but now she was exhausted once again. She'd been grabbing tiny naps in uncomfortable places, spots where she was bound to roll onto a rock or wake up from being cold. As long as she only slept for short amounts of time, it wouldn't be long enough for her to sleepwalk, she thought.

Since she and Brambleclaw had shared the dream of her sister, she hadn't wanted to go back to the medicine den. *She wanted Brambleclaw to stay between worlds with her. What if she does something to him to* make *him stay?* Moonpaw knew that it would be her fault if anything happened to Brambleclaw.

So, no more sleeping under Jayfeather's protection in the medicine den. The only problem was that she was exhausted again. She felt too tired to be as good an apprentice as she ought to be. *And,* she thought, blinking blearily up at the Clan leaders in the Great Oak, way too tired to pay much attention in a Gathering.

She knew she wasn't going to be able to keep this up. Maybe it was time to try to sleep in the apprentices' den again—that way, she could sleep without letting the orange cat near Brambleclaw. Maybe she wouldn't sleepwalk. At least she hoped not.

She let her eyes drift closed, just for a heartbeat.

When she opened them, the orange cat was beside her. "Come play with me," she whispered into Moonpaw's ear. Her breath was warm and she felt solid against Moonpaw's side, much realer than she ever had.

Moonpaw blinked. Had she fallen asleep? She had never seen the orange cat, except in reflections and in dreams. Was she sleeping at a Gathering?

This doesn't feel like a dream. The Gathering island felt familiar, the cats seated near her were all their usual selves.

Maybe I'm half-asleep? Just enough to see her. That didn't feel right, either.

The orange cat flicked her tail disdainfully at Moonpaw, tired of waiting for an answer, and danced toward Sunbeam, who was sitting a little ahead of them.

Moonpaw stiffened. "Leave her alone!" she hissed under her breath.

Beside her, Goldenpaw jumped in surprise. "What?" he murmured.

Moonpaw shook her head. "Nothing."

With a teasing glance back at Moonpaw, the orange cat leaned down and carefully took Sunbeam's tail in her teeth, then yanked. Startled, Sunbeam whipped around and caught Moonpaw's eye.

"Behave yourself!" she hissed.

Moonpaw cringed back, horrified. *Did I do that, or did the orange cat?* The orange cat had been able to control Moonpaw when she was asleep. *Is she getting stronger?* The idea was chilling.

Her green eyes twinkling mischievously, the orange cat headed for Sunbeam again.

"Stop it!" Moonpaw whispered harshly. Sunbeam turned again to glare at her.

This must *be a dream.*

Moonpaw squeezed her eyes shut and shook herself. *Wake up, wake up!* When she opened her eyes again, the orange cat was gone.

"Are you all right?" Goldenpaw asked. He was staring at her, looking puzzled.

"Sorry," Moonpaw meowed. "Just an itch in my pelt."

L*iar!*

Moonpaw resolved, for what felt like the thousandth time, to ignore the voice in her head. Instead she focused on Tigerstar, who was speaking from his branch on the Great Oak. The big dark brown tabby was standing very straight, his head held proudly, as he surveyed the gathered cats with cool amber eyes.

"I can't support sending a patrol to the mountains just as we're heading into leaf-bare," he meowed. "We've acted too quickly before when it comes to StarClan, and now I think we need to bide our time until things become clear. StarClan will let us know what they require of us, as they've always done."

"Well!" Moonpaw's eyes widened as Brambleclaw's ShadowClan sister, Tawnypelt, shot to her paws. "'StarClan will let us know'? Are you forgetting something?" She was bristling with indignation.

Tigerstar glared down at her. "I haven't forgotten anything. I've said what I needed to say. Maybe you should sit down, Tawnypelt."

Ooh, will they fight? He's hiding something! Moonpaw tried to ignore the voice's delighted exclamation.

"Sit down, Tawnypelt," Cloverfoot echoed from her seat among the deputies, but Tawnypelt ignored her. Instead she walked toward the Great Oak, passing between rows of cats and halting just before the deputies and medicine cats among its roots.

"If Tigerstar has said all he needs to say, then there's something *I* need to say," she meowed, gazing up at the leaders, then turning to

look out at the gathered warriors. Moonpaw perked up her ears with interest. Suddenly it wasn't so hard to concentrate on the discussion.

"*I* speak for ShadowClan," Tigerstar hissed, looking furious.

Squirrelstar stepped forward on her branch. "I'm interested in hearing what Tawnypelt has to say."

"So am I," Icestar agreed, and Harestar nodded.

Leafstar glanced at Hawkwing and then shrugged. "Let Tawnypelt speak."

Looking slightly abashed, Tawnypelt dipped her head apologetically to her leader. Tigerstar only glared at her. But when she spoke, the senior warrior's voice was strong. "As a lot of you know, I fell and was hurt where the Twolegs are building their big den. While I was unconscious, I visited StarClan."

Several cats sitting near Moonpaw gasped. She was taken aback, too—it was weird, wasn't it, a warrior speaking to StarClan? She looked over to the medicine cats: Alderheart seemed surprised, and Jayfeather's face was tight with annoyance.

Oh, yeah, a regular cat can't hear spirits. The voice in her head was purring with laughter.

That's different, she thought miserably. *You're not exactly StarClan, are you?*

Tawnypelt went on. "StarClan told me that the Clans would soon face a great peril. I think our losing the Moonpool is that great peril, and that's why I *have* to speak up now." She shot a pleading glance up to Tigerstar in the Great Oak, but his gaze was stony. "Bluestar, who once led ThunderClan, said that I was needed to help lead the Clans out of a moonless dark and onto a new path. I'm sure now that what's happened with the Moonpool is what she meant by a 'moonless dark.'"

"**W**hy would she come to *you*?" a black WindClan tom yowled.

"Sit down, Breezepelt," Crowfeather meowed from his place among the deputies, but Tawnypelt shrugged.

"I don't know," she replied. "But StarClan came to me once before, when they sent us on a quest for a new home. Maybe they

remember, just like I do." Almost hesitantly, she glanced toward ThunderClan, locking eyes for a heartbeat with Moonpaw.

What was that? Moonpaw's heart was pounding. *She wasn't looking at me, was she?*

The voice of her littermate answered. *She definitely was! Do you think StarClan was talking about you? Maybe our parents were right and we are special after all!*

Tawnypelt went on. "Bluestar also told me to 'beware the two-faced cat who has a paw in each world.'" Tawnypelt wasn't looking at Moonpaw now. It even seemed like she was purposefully looking away. But other cats, from all the Clans, were.

Moonpaw's pelt prickled at the feeling of eyes all around her. Beside her, both Shinepaw and Goldenpaw had turned their heads to gaze at her in surprise. A young RiverClan warrior caught her eye and looked away quickly, pretending not to stare, but most of the cats didn't bother. Sunbeam suddenly stood up and moved in front of Moonpaw, blocking her from the view of most of the crowd. But the others, the cats behind and beside her, were still staring. Moonpaw cringed, wishing she could disappear.

***I** hate this! I hate my face! Why can't I just be normal?*

The orange cat's voice for once lacked the edge of sarcasm. She sounded almost sympathetic. *We're the normal ones, Moonpaw. Don't let them make you feel any different.*

Despite herself, Moonpaw felt a tiny blossom of warmth at the reassurance. She wasn't completely alone.

Around them, the Gathering was descending into chaos as, all over the clearing, cats rose to their paws to argue about Tawnypelt's vision. Moonpaw cowered, digging her claws into the ground. They were all so loud!

"But how do you know it was a real message from StarClan?" a gray-and-white tom asked from among the RiverClan cats. "I don't mean to be rude, but it sounds like it could have just been a dream.

I'm not going to follow a prophecy unless I know for sure that it's actually coming from StarClan."

"I'm sure," Tawnypelt answered firmly. "It didn't feel anything like a dream."

"I'd like to know how long ShadowClan has known about Tawnypelt's vision," the RiverClan deputy, Owlnose, meowed, looking up into the Great Oak.

Tigerstar drew himself up stiffly on his branch. "Tawnypelt told me of her dream as soon as she returned to ShadowClan after her injury," he replied. "I decided not to share it with the other Clans because I was, and remain, unconvinced that it's anything more than a dream."

More murmurs rose from the gathered cats.

"Why do you think it's not a real prophecy?" Owlnose asked.

Tigerstar flicked his tail as if flicking the question away. "Maybe it is real. I can't be sure. But if StarClan wanted to give ShadowClan a message, why not speak to Puddleshine, or to me? And if Bluestar wanted to give a prophecy to a warrior, why would she speak to a cat of ShadowClan? She was a ThunderClan leader, and it's been many seasons since my mother was part of ThunderClan."

Tawnypelt used to be in ThunderClan? I guess that makes sense, since Brambleclaw is her brother. Moonpaw felt as if there were parts of Clan history she had never been told.

"Bluestar told me why she was coming to me," Tawnypelt replied, coolly meeting Tigerstar's gaze. "She said that I need not be *the* leader to be *a* leader, and that 'the eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot.'"

"How convenient." Moonpaw saw that, behind his cool stare, Tigerstar was really angry. "You've been worried about what the Twolegs are doing for a long time. And now StarClan has told you that everything you've already believed is true? That the Clans should panic about the Twolegs and follow whatever you decide?"

Tawnypelt looked equally furious, glaring back at her son. The fur was rising along her spine.

Before she could answer, Leafstar spoke up. She had barely spoken during the Gathering, merely reporting the news from SkyClan with frequent glances at her deputy. But now she raised her head proudly. "I believe Tawnypelt is telling the truth," she meowed firmly. "If you're wondering why StarClan didn't share this vision with any of the rest of you, maybe it's because none of you took my or Tawnypelt's worries about the Twolegs seriously enough until it was too late."

"Too late?" Harestar's voice was sharp. "What do you mean, *too late*?"

Leafstar flicked an ear. "The Moonpool is closed to us now, isn't it? If we had worked together sooner, maybe we would have had a solution before it was lost. Now we can't know if we'll be able to contact StarClan again until we figure one out."

Squirrelstar stepped up to stand beside Leafstar on her own branch. "I trust Tawnypelt," she announced. "She's always been honest. I believe that she was visited by StarClan and that her message to us is real."

Harestar rolled his eyes. "No one's calling Tawnypelt a liar," he meowed. "But an injured cat might dream something that feels very real and not know it's a dream. I don't think we should change what we do based on what she thinks she saw, even though we know she wouldn't mislead us on purpose."

"Tawnypelt's always had a good head on her shoulders," Crowfeather commented, gazing up at his leader. "I don't think she'd mistake a dream for a real visit from StarClan."

"What do you think, Icestar?" Owlnose yowled from among the deputies. "Does RiverClan support Tawnypelt?"

Icestar looked over the Clans consideringly, clearly weighing her words. At last, she spoke. "As every cat knows, last leaf-fall RiverClan suffered through the death of our leader and deputy. While we tried to find a new leader, we came into conflict with another Clan."

At this, Tigerstar's tail slashed the air. Moonpaw remembered that Bayshine had told her how Tigerstar and ShadowClan had taken over RiverClan. "We were trying to help," he growled now.

"That fish has long swum past," Icestar meowed. "I'm not trying to start a new battle. My point is that we should do whatever we can to keep the Clans strong and together. If Tawnypelt can guide us toward a solution, I will follow her."

"But what is the solution StarClan wants?" Hawkwing yowled. "What does 'a new path' mean? Do they want us to leave the lake, like SkyClan left our gorge and the other Clans left their forest?"

Moonpaw felt like a cold wind was blowing over her. Leave the lake?

You can't go, the voice meowed. *I'm here.*

"I don't think I have another move in me," Mothwing yowled from her seat among the medicine cats. "I'd rather stay here without StarClan than follow them somewhere else." All the other medicine cats looked shocked.

"If we didn't already know that we *need* StarClan, what happened with the impostor made it clear," Shadowsight broke in. "But I'm also reluctant to leave the lake unless we know for sure that's what StarClan wants from us."

"No one wants to leave the lake," Squirrelstar meowed. "This is the home we found for ourselves when we had nowhere else to go. But if we have to, we *can* find a new home. I think it's too soon for this discussion. Let's wait two moons. If we haven't been able to get to the Moonpool or find another way to contact StarClan by then, we'll talk again."

"Why two moons?" Icestar asked. The crowd of cats had quieted now, and as Moonpaw looked around, she saw dread on every cat's face.

"In two moons we'll be deep into leaf-bare," Squirrelstar answered. "If the Twolegs still have the Moonpool blocked off then, they probably won't be leaving anytime soon. And if the worst comes to pass, newleaf will be the right time to begin a journey."

"So, your solution is the same as mine," Tigerstar meowed with a sneer. "We wait and see what happens."

"No." Squirrelstar looked around the clearing, then down to make eye contact with Crowfeather. "While we wait, I suggest we send a patrol to the Tribe of Rushing Water in the mountains. We ask their Stoneteller to talk to the spirits that walk in their Tribe of Endless Hunting, and we try to contact Feathertail. She walks both with the Tribe and with StarClan. If anyone can talk to them for us, it's her."

"Who's Feathertail?" Moonpaw heard Shinepaw whisper, and beside her she felt Goldenpaw shrug in response. *It doesn't matter!* she wanted to yowl. What mattered was that the Clans were talking about leaving the lake. Whatever—whoever—the Tribe was, or Feathertail was, were the Clan leaders really prepared to take these other cats' advice about leaving their territories? Even if they couldn't reach StarClan, even if the medicine cats never shared tongues with StarClan again, this was their home. Where else could they possibly go?

Y*ou wouldn't have to leave,* the orange cat told her, and her voice was soothing now. *Even if the Clans left, even if all the other cats left, you could stay with me. I would take care of you. Together we don't need StarClan!*

But Moonpaw was trembling. What if the Clans did leave? Would they even let her come? She couldn't forget the other part of Tawnypelt's prophecy, and how cats of all the Clans had turned to look at her, their wide eyes accusing: *Beware the two-faced cat.*

Who was the two-faced cat? Could all those staring eyes be right? Was it Moonpaw?

Chapter 13

"It's an excellent frog," Oakfur meowed cheerfully. "But you always were very good at catching frogs. One of the quickest apprentices I ever saw at anticipating where a hop would land."

"Thanks, Oakfur." Although it was usually an apprentice's job to hunt for the elders, Tawnypelt had risen at dawn for a hunt and brought prey to her old mentor. It was one way to escape the tension that crackled around camp this morning like the air before a thunderstorm. Oakfur was kind enough not to mention the trouble Tawnypelt was in with their leader.

Tawnypelt knew that Tigerstar was furious. When ShadowClan had left last night's Gathering, he had strode ahead of his Clanmates, not looking at or speaking to any cat. Dovewing and Cloverfoot had both shot Tawnypelt exasperated looks, while some of her other Clanmates whispered together, glancing at her out of the corners of their eyes or crowding close to quietly ask Tawnypelt if she *really* thought she had been given a vision by StarClan.

"Hello, Oakfur," Cloverfoot meowed politely as she ducked into the elders' den, and then nodded to Tawnypelt. "Tigerstar wants you to come see him now."

It had been uncomfortable waiting for Tigerstar to calm down enough to talk to her, but Tawnypelt almost wished it had taken a little longer. She got to her paws, swallowing her last bite of frog.

"Certainly." She walked calmly across the clearing, neither hurrying nor dragging her paws, aware that many of her Clanmates were watching.

Tigerstar glared at her when she entered his den, rising so that he towered over her. His voice was almost a growl. "I suppose you know what I want to talk to you about."

Tawnypelt sighed. She was so tired of having this argument with Tigerstar. She hadn't wanted to defy him, and she didn't want to have any conflict with him now. It made her heart ache to be at odds with her son, especially since he was also her Clan leader, but she had done what she thought was right.

"I know you're angry with me for telling the Clans about the prophecy Bluestar gave me," she began, keeping her voice as reasonable and soothing as she could. "But I had to do it. The Clans needed to know, and you wouldn't tell them."

"It was *my* choice when to tell them. *If* I decided to tell them at all," Tigerstar hissed. His amber eyes were blazing with fury. "You can't just not follow my orders because you get impatient."

Even though she had gone into Tigerstar's den determined to be apologetic and make peace with him, Tawnypelt immediately bristled, the fur rising on her haunches. "Do you expect me to put your wishes above StarClan's?" she asked. "Is that what you want?"

"You believe you're the one who decides what StarClan's will is?" Tigerstar retorted, his tail lashing the air. "The word of the Clan leader *is* the warrior code—have you forgotten that?"

"It's not the warrior code anymore," Tawnypelt snarled. "The Clans—*including you*—decided to change the code, and StarClan approved it. Now we're supposed to challenge a leader we think is making a mistake, not just follow them blindly."

Tigerstar drew back, his eyes narrowing. Now he seemed hurt as well as offended. "You think I'm a leader who needs to be challenged by my Clan? You think Cloverfoot, or another warrior, would be a better leader?"

Tawnypelt tried to calm down. She knew how it had shaken Tigerstar when Berryheart had tried to challenge his leadership a few seasons ago. "I think you're a good leader," she meowed

honestly. “ShadowClan wouldn’t even exist if you hadn’t come back. I’m not arguing with your fitness to lead the Clan; I’m just questioning this one decision.”

She would never challenge Tigerstar’s right to lead. She didn’t like to think about the dark time when Tigerheart had left and Rowanclaw had given up on ShadowClan, folding the few cats who remained into SkyClan. And then, worse, the day when Rowanclaw had died and Tawnypelt had finally believed that ShadowClan was gone for good, beyond any hope of revival. Tigerstar’s return had been a rebirth for the Clan, and it had filled her with hope after the difficult days when she had thought her family, and her Clan, were lost forever.

“Then why won’t you follow my lead?” Tigerstar asked. Now he seemed truly baffled, rather than just angry. “If you refuse to do as I ask every time you have a different opinion—if *every* cat did that—then there’s no point in having a leader at all, is there?”

Tawnypelt sighed. “Because I really do believe the future of the Clans is at stake,” she told him. “Of course I respect you as my leader. And I love you as my kin. But ShadowClan can’t thrive while all the Clans are in danger. Bluestar told me that a time of great peril is coming, and I believe her. We need to—”

Before she could say *follow StarClan’s warning*, Tigerstar broke in dismissively. “*Bluestar* told you. Bluestar, a ThunderClan leader. How are you so sure that this vision of yours was even real? When I came to SkyClan to see you after you were injured, you weren’t making much sense. You could barely talk! You could have dreamed anything. What could be more likely than your mind going back to the days when you were a kit in ThunderClan and Bluestar was your leader?”

“Of course I wasn’t making sense then,” Tawnypelt told him. “The SkyClan medicine cats gave me poppy seeds to help me rest and recover. But that was *after* I had the vision and spoke with StarClan. It wasn’t a dream.”

"Or so you think now," Tigerstar argued, taking a step toward her. "Sick cats' minds play tricks on them, especially when they're given strong medicine. You could have dreamed of Bluestar while you were in the medicine den but then remembered it as having happened before."

Tawnypelt stared at her son. It was like he was twisting himself in circles, he was so eager to explain how her vision could not have been a vision. "That's not what happened," she meowed.

Tigerstar flicked his tail as if flicking away her objections. "You can't be sure of that," he declared. "And I still think that if StarClan had this kind of message for the Clans, they would have given it to a medicine cat or leader, not to you."

He doesn't want to believe it. Tawnypelt didn't know why Tigerstar kept refusing to consider that the prophecy she'd received might be real. Maybe he didn't take her seriously, although that was hard for her to believe, after the countless seasons they'd been Clanmates as well as kin; she had even been his deputy during those first moons of rebuilding ShadowClan. She knew he valued her sharp mind.

Maybe he was jealous and thought the vision would have better come to him, but that didn't strike her as likely either: Tigerstar had a firm enough sense of his own importance that he wouldn't begrudge another cat the honor of sharing tongues with StarClan.

Maybe he was afraid. Tigerstar had never flinched at a battle, but perhaps the idea that the Clans' world might change utterly was something that he would turn away from rather than face.

She couldn't suggest any of this to him. If she spoke the accusations that sat heavily on her tongue, he would believe that she was calling him a coward. She might destroy her relationship with her son forever.

Instead, haltingly, she apologized. "I'm sorry, Tigerstar. I didn't intend to embarrass you in front of the other Clans. I can see we aren't going to agree on this. Perhaps it would be better if I left ShadowClan for a little while."

Tigerstar's eyes widened, and he calmed immediately, his fur smoothing. "You don't have to do that," he meowed. "I'm annoyed

that you told the Clans all of this at the Gathering, but no real harm was done. I'm not going to banish you."

"I didn't think you were," Tawnypelt replied. No matter how angry Tigerstar got, she couldn't imagine him banishing her. Kin was the most important thing to her son. "I would like to go to ThunderClan for a few sunrises, if they'll have me. I think Squirrelstar will let me stay for a bit, and I can spend time with Brambleclaw. I spoke to Alderheart before the Gathering, and he says that Brambleclaw is still not doing well." *And, while I'm in ThunderClan, I can discuss my vision with Squirrelstar and keep an eye on that apprentice with the divided face, just in case.*

Tigerstar's pelt began to bristle again, but he spoke calmly. "I would never prevent you from seeing your littermate. But you must remember that ShadowClan is your Clan, not ThunderClan. And I am your leader, not Squirrelstar."

"I know that!" Despite Tawnypelt's resolve to not antagonize Tigerstar any further, she could hear the indignation in her own yowl. What did he think of her? She was no Clan-swapper, not since she was very young, and that decision had been agonizing. "I simply wish to spend some time in ThunderClan."

Tigerstar's tail was twitching. "I can't treat you any differently from any other warrior, Tawnypelt," he warned. "You need to remember where you belong. You can go visit Brambleclaw, but I expect you back in two sunrises. If you stay away too long without permission, I can't promise you'll be welcomed back."

Tawnypelt stared at him for a long moment. *Is he serious?* She couldn't imagine that ShadowClan, or Tigerstar, wouldn't welcome her back. She had been loyal to her Clan for so long. She had been the one to hold ShadowClan together when Tigerstar himself had left. There was a guilty, defiant tilt to Tigerstar's whiskers. She could tell he was already regretting his words, but she knew he would never take them back.

"I understand," she meowed, then turned and left. *I'll come back when I'm ready, whether that's in two sunrises or not.*

Sunhigh was long past by the time Tawnypelt entered ThunderClan's camp. She had waited at the border until Poppyfrost and Stemtail had come past on patrol and asked them to escort her to Squirrelstar.

"Can't stay away, can you?" Thornclaw yowled teasingly from where he was sunning himself on the halfrock outside the elders' den.

Whitewing and Birchfall, sharpening their claws on a fallen log near the stone wall of the quarry, exchanged glances. "Are you bringing us more bad news from StarClan?" Whitewing asked with a slight edge in her voice.

"She's here to see Squirrelstar," Poppyfrost told them, and headed for the path up to the leader's den. "Wait here, Tawnypelt."

Tawnypelt lightly leaped onto the halfrock and, with a cheerful greeting, settled on the sun-warmed rock beside Thornclaw, curling her tail around her paws. There was no reason for her not to be comfortable while she waited, and she could chat with an old friend.

He looked at her wryly. "You really threw a hedgehog in the fresh-kill pile with your announcement at the Gathering, you know. Every cat is worried about what your dream means."

Tawnypelt shrugged. "They *should* be worried. StarClan doesn't send messages for no reason."

"True enough." Thornclaw gazed steadily at her. "I have faith in the Clans, though. We've come through a lot."

Soon Squirrelstar hurried down the rocky path from her den and came toward her. "Hi, Tawnypelt," she meowed, sounding surprised but friendly. "Why don't you come up to my den so we can talk?"

Tawnypelt noticed irritation crossing the faces of several of the cats nearby. *They were hoping to overhear some gossip,* she thought. *Too bad!* "Of course, Squirrelstar," she answered, getting to her paws and following Squirrelstar back toward the leader's den.

Once they were safely inside Squirrelstar's cozy cave, the ThunderClan leader meowed, "I imagine Tigerstar had some things to say about your announcement at the Gathering last night."

Tawnypelt sighed. “How did you know?” she asked wryly. “I really didn’t want to go against his wishes, but I felt that it was necessary. I had waited as long as I could, but I had to tell the rest of the Clans what StarClan told me. It affects all of us.”

“I agree. But it’s so hard to know what to do.” Squirrelstar looked downcast for a few heartbeats, then brightened. “Still, I think sending a patrol to the Tribe will help. I’m sending Ivypool to represent ThunderClan. And at least your dream tells us that StarClan has a plan for us. I’m sure Tigerstar will come around.”

“I suppose.” Tawnypelt was glad Squirrelstar was taking the problem seriously enough to send her deputy, but she felt doubtful about whether Tigerstar would come around. Her son did his best to be a fair leader, but he’d always been terribly stubborn, even as a kit. She shifted uncomfortably, remembering that she hadn’t yet asked Squirrelstar if she’d be allowed to remain in ThunderClan for a visit. “I think it would be best to give him a few days to cool off. If you’re willing to have me, I was hoping I could stay here, just for a little while.”

Squirrelstar looked startled, then pleased. “It would do Brambleclaw good to have you here,” she meowed. “He’s having a hard time recovering, and it really cheered him up when you visited.”

“Is he worse?” Tawnypelt asked apprehensively. “Alderheart said he wasn’t doing well.” She hadn’t liked how thin and feverish Brambleclaw had seemed when she had been there last, but only a few days had passed. If he was rapidly getting worse, that seemed like a really bad sign.

“I don’t think so,” Squirrelstar meowed, looking worried. “But it’s hard on him, being in the medicine den all the time. He’ll welcome your company while you’re here, and so will I.”

That’s a relief. Tawnypelt couldn’t imagine where she would have gone if Squirrelstar hadn’t allowed her to stay. She certainly wouldn’t have gone humbly back to ShadowClan, not before at least two sunrises had passed.

“I don’t expect just to live off ThunderClan,” Tawnypelt assured Squirrelstar. “If you’ll allow me to hunt with your patrols, I’ll catch prey for the fresh-kill pile. And I’ll help in camp any way I can.”

"Thank you, Tawnypelt," Squirrelstar meowed. "I think we can allow you to be a guest for a day or two. After all, you'll be going back to ShadowClan soon. I'm afraid the warriors' den and the elders' den are quite crowded, but, if you don't mind sleeping in the apprentices' den, we can fit you in. There are only three apprentices right now, and two of them, Goldenpaw and Shinepaw, are your kin. They're Nightheart and Sunbeam's kits."

"That sounds fine," Tawnypelt agreed. Privately, she thought that as an apprentice she would have been dismayed to have a senior warrior of another Clan sleeping in her den. *How awkward for them.* But it was Squirrelstar's decision and it would make it easy for Tawnypelt to get to know young Moonpaw. If she was a perfectly normal apprentice, then Tawnypelt could ignore the little niggle of concern she'd felt when she saw the young cat's divided face.

Squirrelstar looked at her with a warm green gaze. "I'm glad you're here, Tawnypelt," she meowed. "Do you want to come with me to the medicine den to see if Brambleclaw is awake? He'll be happy to see you back so soon."

"Okay." Tawnypelt felt pleased to be able to see Brambleclaw right away. Visiting him made her feel like she'd come to ThunderClan for a useful purpose, not just to avoid an angry Tigerstar.

She followed Squirrelstar down the narrow path from the leader's den and across the camp, nodding or waving her tail in greeting to warriors who called out to her. As they passed the elders' den, an apprentice came out, dragging some old moss; she must be refreshing the elders' nests. Tawnypelt realized it was Moonpaw and noticed with interest that her eyes were two different colors; she hadn't been close enough to her before to tell.

As they passed, Moonpaw spat out a piece of moss and glared to one side, seeming not to notice Squirrelstar and Tawnypelt passing her. "You're making this harder!" she muttered. Tawnypelt glanced at Squirrelstar to see her reaction to the words, but Squirrelstar didn't seem to have heard them.

Tawnypelt looked back at her as the apprentice grumbled her way back into the den. She was definitely alone. There was no other apprentice anywhere nearby. Had she been talking to herself?

Odd. Tawnypelt didn’t want to jump to any conclusions. She wasn’t going to make life harder for an apprentice just because of some vague suspicions. But she also wasn’t going to forget that StarClan wanted her to beware a two-faced cat.

She was definitely going to keep an eye on Moonpaw.

Chapter 14

"How long will you be gone?" Starlingpaw asked Tree, shifting from one paw to the other. The cats who were going to visit the Tribe of Rushing Water to ask for advice about the Moonpool were gathering at the edge of SkyClan's camp, and Starlingpaw watched them with interest. There were representatives from each Clan: Crowfeather and Hootwhisker from WindClan, Shadowsight from ShadowClan, Ivypool from ThunderClan, and Duskfur from RiverClan. Fidgetflake and Tree would be joining them as the SkyClan representatives on the journey.

"Oh, probably half a moon or more," Tree meowed casually. "It's a long way, and then who knows how much time it will take to get their Stoneteller's advice and try to contact StarClan."

"More than half a moon?" Starlingpaw's eyes widened. "I've barely even left Clan territory." Such a long journey sounded very exciting. "All the cats who are going are so important, too," he commented. "Medicine cats, senior warriors, and deputies. It shows how serious the Clans are about this quest."

"Don't forget about me, my young kin," Tree meowed. "I am an incredibly important member of SkyClan."

He was clearly joking, but it was true. Tree was SkyClan's mediator, the cat tasked with resolving problems with other Clans before they came to battles. Starlingpaw had once heard an older

warrior say that Tree was only the mediator because no cat could get him to cooperate with warrior training, but Starlingpaw doubted that. Tree was great at talking to cats; it made sense he would be a terrific mediator!

"I wish I could go," Starlingpaw meowed wistfully. Exploring the mysterious mountains and meeting cats who belonged to not a Clan but the Tribe sounded like such a wonderful adventure.

As he watched, Fidgetflake left the group and ducked into the medicine den. He and Frecklewish came back out together, carrying dock leaves wrapped around herbs, one for each member of the patrol.

"What are those?" Starlingpaw asked.

"Traveling herbs," Tree told him. "They'll help give us energy and endurance for a long journey."

Most of SkyClan was gathered around the patrol now to say goodbye and wish them well. Even Leafstar had joined them, shoulder to shoulder with Hawkwing.

If I were going with them, I could keep an eye on Fidgetflake, Starlingpaw thought, as he watched the black-and-white medicine cat distributing the little packets of herbs. He hadn't made much progress in figuring out if Fidgetflake could be the two-faced cat that StarClan had warned about, but he didn't like thinking about a possible two-faced cat going on such an important journey. Could he tell Tree and ask him to watch Fidgetflake? He eyed the mediator beside him. Would Tree believe him? He didn't actually have much to justify his suspicions. Still . . . "Tree—" he began tentatively.

He was interrupted as Violetshine, Tree's mate, came over to brush her pelt against his. "You're going to be careful, aren't you?" she asked. "I'm expecting you back as soon as possible."

"You don't need to worry about me," Tree replied. "I survived a long time on my own before I came to the Clans, you know."

"I suppose," Violetshine meowed. "But you didn't have so many kin waiting for you to come back." Her warm glance included Starlingpaw in their conversation.

"If you're quite done, perhaps you'd join the rest of us, Tree?" Crowfeather yowled from among the others. "Some of us would like

to make it to the Tribe before greenleaf comes again." Crowfeather, who had visited the Tribe before, was leading the patrol.

Hootwhisker, less abrasive than his Clanmate, looked apologetic. "I suppose we should head off."

Tree, not one to be hurried, bent to whisper in Starlingpaw's ear. "Rumor has it that Feathertail, the cat who walks in both StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting, is Crowfeather's lost love. Some cats say he named himself after her."

Starlingpaw stared at Crowfeather. *Lost love?* Crowfeather was older than Starlingpaw's parents and had a son whose kits had had kits. It seemed highly unlikely to Starlingpaw that the WindClan deputy was still mourning a lost romance from his youth.

Crowfeather cleared his throat loudly and Tree shrugged, stepping forward. "Keep your fur on," he purred, and bent toward his pile of traveling herbs.

"Wait," Hawkwing meowed suddenly. Every cat turned toward him. Tree raised his head.

"What is it?" Duskfur asked, concerned.

"**M**aybe Tree should stay here," Hawkwing suggested. "Is this a good time for the Clans' only mediator to leave the lake?"

Tree looked startled. "Do you expect to need a mediator in the next moon?"

"Well, we don't know, do we?" The SkyClan deputy sounded worried. "I certainly hope we won't run into any problems between the Clans that *need* mediating, but tensions are running high because of the Moonpool. Maybe you should stay here, just in case."

Tree shrugged, indifferent. "I'd be sorry to miss the journey, of course," he meowed, "but whatever you think is best."

Hawkwing looked around. "Who should we send in your place, though? What do you think, Leafstar?" A thrill went through Starlingpaw as the big gray tabby glanced at him. *Would they send an apprentice?*

"Quite a few of the Clans think sending one cat is enough," Ivypool meowed dryly, but Hawkwing shook his head.

"SkyClan has chosen to send two cats, a medicine cat and a warrior," he answered. His eye stopped on Starlingpaw's mentor. "How about you, Nectarsong?"

Nectarsong looked briefly thrilled, and then her eyes slid to Starlingpaw. "I have an apprentice to train . . ."

"Can't I go too?" Starlingpaw burst out. Every cat turned to stare at him, but he didn't cower under their attention. Instead he stood straight, trying to look dependable and mature. "Nectarsong is my mentor," he meowed. "I've learned a lot from her, and I think I could be useful on the journey."

To his surprise, Hawkwing seemed to be considering it. Perking his ears hopefully, Starlingpaw exchanged excited looks with Nectarsong.

"Starlingpaw has been a fine apprentice," Nectarsong meowed. "I'd be happy to have him with me."

Duskfur looked doubtful. "He's very young," she meowed.

"I've traveled to the Tribe before, and it's a tricky journey. A smaller cat might be useful," Shadowsight suggested. "We may need a cat who can slip through tight spaces in the mountains."

Excitement thrummed through Starlingpaw. Were they really going to let him go?

"Is it wise to send such a young cat to the mountains so close to leaf-bare?" Needleclaw's whiskers were quivering. Starlingpaw felt a pang of guilt as he looked at his mother—she'd been so sad, and his leaving would give her one more thing to worry about—but he still *desperately* wanted to go on this adventure, now that it seemed possible.

"Starlingpaw knows what he can handle," Tree purred reassuringly, brushing his tail over his daughter's back. "He's got a good head on his shoulders."

The cats of the patrol looked at each other, and no one objected. The matter seemed to be settled.

"As long as Starlingpaw doesn't act like the average young bee-brain and Nectarsong keeps an eye on him," Crowfeather meowed crossly.

"I promise," Starlingpaw gasped.

"I'll watch over Starlingpaw," Nectarsong added.

Frecklewish brought out another dock leaf of traveling herbs, and Starlingpaw and Nectarsong licked them up. He recognized the musty taste of chamomile, but the other herbs were a mystery to him. *They taste of adventure,* he decided.

Then there were a few moments of confusion as the cats of SkyClan crowded around the patrol, wishing the questing cats goodbye and good luck.

"Be careful," Needleclaw meowed, pressing her face to Starlingpaw's. He breathed in his mother's scent and gave her cheek a quick lick.

"I will, I promise."

"Lucky," Robinpaw complained, then flicked him with her tail. "Come back safe and tell me all about it."

"You'll be fine," Tree whispered in his ear, and then Starlingpaw and his companions were leaving the SkyClan camp, following Crowfeather toward the distant mountains. Starlingpaw kept pace with Nectarsong beside him. As they began to climb the hills toward the edge of SkyClan's territory, there was a chill in the air, and the stones beneath his paws were cold. But the sky was blue and the sun was shining brightly. He exchanged a glance with Nectarsong and realized his mentor was just as excited as he was.

He took a deep breath of the cold, clear air. He thought it already smelled a little wilder than the air of SkyClan's camp. His pelt prickled with anticipation. *I'm off on a very important adventure!*

Two sunrises later, they reached the foothills of the Tribe's mountain as the sun was sinking toward the horizon. From far away, the mountain had been a smallish dark shape huddling at the edge of the land, but now it was huge, rising almost unbelievably high, blocking out the sky ahead. Starlingpaw tilted his head back, craning his neck to look up and up at the great stony shapes, so much taller than SkyClan's familiar hills.

"We'll stop here," Crowfeather decided. "There's no point in being halfway up the mountain at sunset." From the wistful look the WindClan deputy sent toward the mountain's peak, Starlingpaw thought that he was wishing they could keep going and could arrive at the Tribe's cave sooner.

"Let's split up and hunt," Ivypool suggested, once they'd decided to make camp for the night on a comfortable, sheltered patch of ground. The grass still grew thickly there despite the fact that it was nearly leaf-bare. She and Duskfur walked off together toward a grove of spindly trees.

"I'd like to check and see if there are any useful herbs growing near here," Shadowsight commented, and Fidgetflake nodded.

"I can smell fresh water over that hill. If we're lucky, maybe we'll find some burdock growing near it. It would be good to have if any cat gets injured."

As the medicine cats strode off in one direction and the WindClan cats in another, Nectarsong beckoned with her tail to Starlingpaw. "This is a good time to practice hunting in new terrain," she meowed. "Come with me."

Curious, Starlingpaw followed her toward the mountain. As they got closer, the grass and low bushes thinned, and long stretches of rock, rising from the earth, appeared. *They look like the bones of the mountain.*

"What would happen if prey was driven onto the rock?" Nectarsong asked. Starlingpaw looked around, picturing a vole or mouse chased onto the rocks, its tiny claws scrabbling against the stone.

"It would be harder for it to get away?" he answered tentatively. "It couldn't dodge into a hole or under a root."

"Yes!" Nectarsong's reply was full of warmth. "And this is a good place. Look at the shape of the rock here." The sides and back of the stone curved up, while the edge nearest them was flush with the ground. "What would happen if prey ran in here and couldn't come back the same way?"

Starlingpaw imagined the vole trying to climb the rising slopes of stone. It might be able to claw its way up eventually, but it would be

difficult and slow. “It would take it a while to get out, if it could at all.”

“Yes!” Nectarsong meowed again. “Let’s find some prey and try to drive it this way. We’ll see if it works the way you think it will.”

They spread out, searching through the clover and dry grass of the slope for hidden prey. Starlingpaw scented the air, listening carefully for the faintest sound of movement. At first he heard only the rustle of the wind rushing through the grass and Nectarsong’s quiet paw steps.

Then there was the slightest shuffle of dead leaves beneath a low thornbush. Starlingpaw froze, focusing. Beneath the musty scent of the little pile of leaves, he scented mouse and heard the faint, rapid beat of his prey’s heart.

“Go on . . . ,” Nectarsong meowed softly.

Starlingpaw angled himself so that the hidden mouse was directly between him and the little canyon of stone they’d found. He crouched, keeping his breathing even and his tail low and still, just the way Nectarsong had taught him. He waited until the mouse stilled and the rustling among the dead leaves stopped, and then, with a quick swipe of his paw, he threw the leaves aside.

Panicked, the mouse ran directly away from him. Dodging past the bush, Starlingpaw chased after it. It had a lead on him and was quick with fear—*I might not catch it,* he thought—but once it was driven onto the rocks, it had nowhere to go. As the mouse skittered from one side of the stone to the other, Starlingpaw pounced, sinking his teeth into the back of the mouse’s neck and killing it quickly.

“Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” he muttered.

“Good work, Starlingpaw,” Nectarsong cheered. “Let’s catch some more!”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Starlingpaw walked proudly beside Nectarsong back to their temporary camp. He held his head

high despite the weight of the four mice dangling from his mouth. Nectarsong carried three more.

"Nice catch," Ivypool purred as they joined the other cats.

"It looks like we weren't the only ones who found the prey running well," Nectarsong meowed, dropping her mice on a small fresh-kill pile that already included several voles, a squirrel, and a skinny rabbit. "Did you find the burdock root you wanted?" she asked Fidgetflake, and he shook his head.

"There's a nice patch of feverfew growing along the bank, though. We'll keep it in mind in case any cat is feeling ill on the way back."

After they had all eaten their fill, there was enough prey left to bury to eat the next morning before they began their journey toward the Tribe's cave.

"Prey is scarce in the mountains," Crowfeather told them. "We'll be grateful to have eaten well."

The cats settled down to sleep, and Starlingpaw gazed up at Silverpelt shining brightly overhead, above the mountaintop. Something twisted nervously in his chest; he was so far from SkyClan's territory and from everything he knew.

"Crowfeather?" he whispered nervously. "What is the Tribe of Rushing Water like?"

He half expected the WindClan deputy to snap at him to be quiet, but Crowfeather looked around at the other cats, all with their eyes fixed on him eagerly. "Well," he meowed, "the Stoneteller is both their leader and their medicine cat. The Tribe lives in a cave, and there's another one behind it called the Cave of Pointed Stones. Stoneteller interprets the signs from those stones and from pools of water among them and uses them to speak to their ancestors, the Tribe of Endless Hunting." He paused and thought. "The Tribe cats aren't warriors like we are. Some of them are cave-guards and some are prey-hunters, and the prey-hunters hunt together to catch the great birds that fly among the mountain peaks."

"Are the Tribe cats nice?" Starlingpaw felt foolish for asking, but Crowfeather answered, sounding sleepy and contemplative.

"They're cats, when all is said and done, just as we are. Some are nice, some less so. They'll give us a chance to explain what we

want."

The next morning, the cats got up early and began their climb. At first the foothills rose in a gentle slope, but soon the cats were clambering over boulders and sliding through small gaps between slabs of stone as the terrain grew steeper. Underfoot, the soil grew thin and rocky.

Starlingpaw, smaller than his companions, scrabbled with his claws, trying to climb over a wall of gray stone.

"Here you go," Fidgetflake meowed, pushing him from below until Starlingpaw was able to scramble up.

"Thanks," Starlingpaw meowed, out of breath, as Fidgetflake leaped up beside him.

"You're welcome," Fidgetflake meowed. They walked together for a moment and Fidgetflake asked, "How are you doing, Starlingpaw? You haven't had any trouble keeping up? No scrapes or injuries?"

"No, I'm fine," Starlingpaw answered. His paws were a little sore, but he wouldn't have complained to the medicine cat for anything.

He suddenly realized that this was the perfect opportunity to try to investigate Fidgetflake. *Could* he be the two-faced cat that Tawnypelt had warned against? Starlingpaw wished again that he had been able to talk to Tawnypelt at the Gathering and get some instructions on what he should be doing.

"So," he meowed, trying to sound casual, "soon Hawkwing will be our leader."

"Maybe," Fidgetflake answered. He looked worried. "He can't get his nine lives without the Moonpool. I only hope that this journey can help."

"I noticed you voted against Leafstar when SkyClan was deciding whether to depose her as leader," Starlingpaw meowed. "Did you really not want her as leader anymore? You've been advising her as medicine cat for a long time, haven't you?"

Fidgetflake's tail twitched, and he glanced at Starlingpaw. *Does he look uncomfortable?* Starlingpaw wondered. *Maybe even guilty?*

"I did what I felt was best for SkyClan," Fidgetflake meowed stiffly. "Leafstar is getting older, and I'm worried that her judgment is getting worse. It's not about whether she has been a good leader for SkyClan all along; it's about the leader she is now. I'd expect you to understand that, Starlingpaw."

For a heartbeat, Starlingpaw didn't know why Fidgetflake expected *him* to understand. Then he felt sick. Of course, this was about Kitescratch's death. Some cats thought Leafstar was responsible, but he knew it was him. Leafstar shouldn't be blamed.

He decided to press on. The second time the Clan voted, it had been after Leafstar's hunting accident. She'd been woozy and ill, unable to defend herself. "Leafstar did seem really out of it after her accident," he began. "No wonder so many cats thought she wasn't able to lead. I guess she had taken a lot of poppy seeds. How did you and Frecklewish decide how many to give her?"

He'd intended to be subtle, but Fidgetflake turned on him, his tail lashing. "Leafstar was in a lot of pain," he hissed. "Any medicine cat would have tried to relieve it as well as they could."

A jolt of guilt shot through Starlingpaw. He hadn't meant for Fidgetflake to think that Starlingpaw was accusing him of something. If he *wasn't* the two-faced cat, Starlingpaw owed Fidgetflake some loyalty for the moons the medicine cat had watched over Starlingpaw as well as all the other members of SkyClan.

Before he could say anything, Crowfeather yowled for a halt from the top of another jagged rock. The cats gathered around him, and he pointed with his tail to a silvery streak running down the mountainside far above.

"That's it," Crowfeather meowed. "That's the waterfall that falls over the entrance to the Tribe's cave. That's where we're going."

Starlingpaw looked up and up, past gray rock faces and rounded boulders. Way up there, not far below the mountain peak among the clouds, other cats lived in a world he'd never imagined. And soon he'd meet them.

As the cats set off again, Fidgetflake hurried away from Starlingpaw, no longer willing to boost him over the tallest boulders. Starlingpaw didn't mind. Maybe Fidgetflake was innocent, but Starlingpaw had needed to see how he reacted to questions about Leafstar. And Fidgetflake's discomfort with the questions just might have told him something.

And maybe when they reached the Tribe of Rushing Water, Stoneteller would be able to tell him more.

Chapter 15

"Come on, Moonpaw!" Sunbeam sounded a little exasperated, as if she'd already called Moonpaw more than once.

Moonpaw tucked the last trailing piece of bracken into Brightheart's nest and gave a final quick look around the elders' den, feeling dispirited. Her fur felt heavy on her back, dragging her down. She was so tired. "Coming!" she yowled back.

It had been a miserable day so far, she reflected as she hurried toward the camp entrance where Sunbeam, along with Goldenpaw, Shinepaw, and their mentors, were waiting impatiently for her. While she'd hurried about with tasks in the camp, the orange cat had teased and tormented her, pulling apart nests as she made them, moving piles of bracken and moss that she'd just gathered together. She'd gone to the fresh-kill pile to bring Brackenfur a nice shrew, and the shrew had slid away from her until it landed at Lilyheart's paws. Moonpaw had frozen—*surely* some cat had noticed something weird there!—but Lilyheart had only tsked and told her to be more careful.

The one cat who seemed to have noticed something odd about Moonpaw was Tawnypelt, the ShadowClan warrior who was visiting ThunderClan. She'd passed as Moonpaw dragged old bedding out of the elders' den, and she'd given Moonpaw a sharp, suspicious look.

She thinks I'm the two-faced cat StarClan warned her about, Moonpaw thought anxiously. *Maybe she's right.*

***D**on't worry about it,* the voice in her head said, more supportive than usual. *She doesn't know anything*. *She's bee-brained like all the warriors.*

Shut up, Moonpaw thought fiercely, and tried not to listen. She was so tired.

"Finally!" Finleap meowed as Moonpaw joined the others, then looked shamefaced when Sunbeam flicked her tail at him impatiently.

"Moonpaw had duties to finish," she told him, leading the way out of camp. "But she's got a knack for the battle moves I've showed her so far. I think you'll be impressed."

I wish she hadn't said that, Moonpaw thought grimly. She'd easily learned the fighting techniques Sunbeam had shown her a few days ago, but that was when she'd had some *sleep*.

"Just wait," Goldenpaw meowed, bouncing along beside her. "You might have a knack for fighting, but I'm a natural, I know it."

"You're bigger than either of us," Shinepaw replied teasingly, "but I'm pretty sure we're faster."

"I am not slow," Goldenpaw mock-growled, knocking his shoulder against hers. "Stop saying that!"

Moonpaw let her mind wander, sure that the other apprentices would be busy entertaining each other for a bit. As she walked, she began to tense her muscles, first one leg then the others, one by one, and flexing and retracting her claws. She needed to wake up and get ready to fight; she wasn't going to let Sunbeam down after Sunbeam had praised her to the other apprentices' mentors. Even though she was Goldenpaw and Shinepaw's mother, she focused on Moonpaw when they were training; her kits had their own mentors. Moonpaw didn't think that every cat would be able to do that.

They stopped at a stretch of open, grassy land beneath the trees. "Okay," Flipclaw meowed. "Sunbeam and Finleap are going to demonstrate a fighting move we want you to learn while I talk you

through it, and then you'll all get a chance to try. We'll go through the move slowly the first time."

Sunbeam lay down on the grass, rolling onto her back, and Finleap hovered above her, his front paws on either side of her body.

"If an opponent gets you on your back in battle, it can feel like a real disadvantage," Flipclaw told the apprentices. "But once you're on your back, you can defend yourself with all four paws. Now watch. Sunbeam is going to feint, pretending she's about to strike Finleap on the shoulder."

Slowly, Sunbeam swiped her right paw toward Finleap.

"But as Finleap reacts to that," Flipclaw meowed, "Sunbeam surprises him with a swipe at his ears with her other front paw, while also kicking at his unprotected belly with her hind paws."

Finleap flinched back from the blow of Sunbeam's right paw and then Sunbeam, claws retracted, drew her left front paw across Finleap's face, and at the same time bunched her hind legs and kicked out, pushing Finleap backward and away from her.

"Oof," Finleap exhaled, grimacing. "Even when you do that move slowly, it knocks the breath out of me."

"You see?" Sunbeam asked the apprentices, rolling over and shaking the dirt out of her pelt. "We'll do it once more before you try."

"Why don't you get on top this time, Sunbeam?" Finleap suggested. "Give me a chance to kick you instead."

"Faster this time," Flipclaw meowed, and the other warriors got into position again, Finleap on his back in the grass this time.

Moonpaw watched closely, her claws flexing in the grass. Her vision was a little bleary with tiredness, but she thought she could do the move, picturing how she could use her hind-leg muscles to fling an attacker backward, while striking with her front paw at the same time.

"Got it?" Flipclaw asked cheerfully. "Now it's time for you three to try. I'll partner with one of you, and then we can switch around."

"It's a good move for a smaller cat to use against a bigger one," Sunbeam meowed as she and Finleap got to their paws. "Size doesn't matter so much. Since Moonpaw's the smallest, let's match her against Goldenpaw. Moonpaw, you start on your back."

Moonpaw lay in the grass, belly up, and Goldenpaw came to stand above her. She gave a little shiver—it didn't seem natural to put herself in such a vulnerable position on purpose. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Shinepaw beside her a tail-length away, Flipclaw standing over her.

"Okay, Goldenpaw, Flipclaw, begin," Sunbeam instructed.

Goldenpaw leaned over Moonpaw, raising a front paw in threat. Moonpaw drew up a paw, aiming a pretended blow at his shoulder. Goldenpaw shifted automatically, his body anticipating the blow, and as fast as she could, Moonpaw slashed at his ears with her other paw, simultaneously kicking out with her hind legs.

Perfect. Moonpaw felt a rush of triumph as the blow landed and Goldenpaw stumbled back, knocked off balance. But it was short-lived.

"My eye!" Goldenpaw wailed. Moonpaw scrambled to her paws, dismayed. There was blood oozing from Goldenpaw's tightly clenched eye.

"Goldenpaw!" Sunbeam yowled, rushing to her son's side. "Let me see."

"Don't try to open it," Shinepaw told her littermate. "We'll get you to Alderheart."

"It hurts," Goldenpaw cried, his voice strained and panicky. "I can't see."

Finleap was staring at Moonpaw. "Your claws," he meowed. "What were you thinking? This isn't a battle!"

Moonpaw looked down. She hadn't retracted her claws, she realized. Two of them were tipped with blood. A horrible wave of guilt washed over her. *What have I done?*

"I'm sorry," she meowed helplessly. "Goldenpaw, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean it . . . I was aiming for your ear, I swear!" But no cat was listening to her now. Finleap and Sunbeam were supporting Goldenpaw between them, guiding the suddenly blinded cat back to camp as Shinepaw and Flipclaw hurried beside them, reassuring Goldenpaw that he would be all right.

Moonpaw followed behind, terrified. She couldn't stop thinking about Brightheart's missing eye, her terrible scars. What if that happened to Goldenpaw? What if he never saw out of that eye again, and it was *her* fault? How could she have been so careless?

You've ruined everything, the other cat meowed, sounding gleeful. *Goldenpaw and Shinepaw won't be your friends now. Every cat will hate you.*

Shut up! Moonpaw thought. *Shut up, shut up, shut up.* But the voice in her head kept going.

You don't think they'll let you be a warrior, do you? The voice softened. *But I still like you,* it meowed. *I'm your friend. You can come join me anytime you like.*

Moonpaw shook herself angrily, trying to rid herself of the voice, and picked up her pace as the little group of cats reached ThunderClan's camp. As soon as they came through the thorn tunnel, Goldenpaw's father, Nightheart, dropped the squirrel he'd been bringing to the fresh-kill pile and bolted over to his son.

"What happened?" he yowled.

"A training accident," Sunbeam explained quickly. "Moonpaw forgot to sheathe her claws."

To Moonpaw, it seemed that a sudden silence fell over camp and that every cat's eyes turned on her accusingly. Tawnypelt's green gaze felt especially piercing. *I guess you were right,* Moonpaw thought bitterly. *You told them to beware the two-faced cat. They should have listened.*

"What's going on?" Alderheart meowed, coming out of the medicine den before they could reach it. "Oh, Goldenpaw, let me see."

The other cats drew back and Alderheart examined Goldenpaw's eye. "Quite a scratch," he commented. "Come on in and Jayfeather and I will treat it." Looking at the worried knot of cats around them, he added, "Nightheart and Sunbeam can come in if they want to. The rest of you need to give us space to work."

As Alderheart gently guided Goldenpaw into the medicine den, Moonpaw hovered anxiously outside, trying to see through the screen of brambles that covered the den's entrance. Shinepaw pushed in beside her and they both stared in anxiously. Moonpaw could see the glow of Goldenpaw's coat, half blocked by the shapes of his parents. She felt like the gaze of every other cat in camp was fixed accusingly on her back.

"Hold your head still, Goldenpaw, and try to open your eye," Alderheart meowed. Goldenpaw whimpered in pain. After a moment, he told Goldenpaw to relax. "Let your eye close naturally."

Alderheart and Jayfeather bent their heads together in discussion. Moonpaw strained her ears to hear. Would the medicine cats use words like *blindness*? Would they predict that Goldenpaw would lose his eye? *I can't believe I was so stupid,* she thought.

It was pretty dumb, the voice agreed. *But don't worry. It doesn't matter what all these Clan mouse-brains think of you now that you've attacked Goldenpaw. You can just play with me.*

"I didn't attack him," Moonpaw whispered.

Shinepaw stared at her. "No one thought you did," she meowed. "But you need to pay attention to what you're doing. Goldenpaw might be really hurt, and it's your fault. Now shush, I'm trying to hear."

See? The orange cat's voice was triumphant. *They all blame you.*

Stop it, Moonpaw willed. She listened hard as Alderheart described Goldenpaw's injury to Jayfeather, detailing a long scratch across the eyelid and a short scrape at the edge of the eye where one of her claws had caught.

"No serious damage, then," Jayfeather meowed calmly, and all of Moonpaw's breath went out of her in a long, relieved exhale. Beside

her, Shinepaw sat down abruptly, as if her legs had suddenly given out.

"We'd better keep the eye closed for a day or so. Moss held on with honey?" Alderheart suggested.

"Pinesap will protect against infection just as well, and it won't attract insects as much," Jayfeather meowed. "I'll get it."

As Jayfeather moved toward the back of the den, Sunbeam meowed shakily, "So he'll be all right?"

"Should be," Jayfeather meowed. "Next time, try to dodge anything coming at your eyes, Goldenpaw."

"I tried!" Goldenpaw yowled indignantly. He already sounded much better, now that he'd been assured he would be okay. "Moonpaw is fast!"

Guilt coiled in Moonpaw's belly.

"Here," Jayfeather meowed, and Moonpaw could see motion behind the brambles as Alderheart began to apply moss and sap to Goldenpaw's eye. "This is just to keep you from moving your eyelid. We'll take it off tomorrow or the next day. And these herbs are to stave off infection."

"How's the pain?" Alderheart asked. "We can give you a poppy seed if you think you need it."

"No, it stings, but it's not bad anymore," Goldenpaw meowed.

"Then you can rest in your own den," Jayfeather instructed. "I think you should lie down for the rest of the day, but you'll be able to get up and perform your apprentice duties tomorrow."

There was a chorus of thanks from Goldenpaw and his parents as they left the den. Moonpaw shrank back, and they didn't look at her. *I should apologize again. But do they want to hear anything from me?* Shinepaw joined her kin as they headed for the apprentices' den.

Moonpaw watched them walk away and realized she had nowhere to go. She couldn't go back to her den: Goldenpaw was there, injured by her paw. He and Shinepaw wouldn't welcome her company. And she didn't want to go eat, or chat with any of the warriors or elders. Word of her stupid mistake—or worse, gossip about whether she'd hurt Goldenpaw on purpose—was bound to be

spreading across camp. Even her parents would be angry at her, she was sure.

She tried to avoid every cat's gaze, but from across the camp her eyes locked with Tawnypelt's, and Moonpaw quickly looked away, her heart pounding.

If you're not the two-faced cat, you're doing a good job of convincing her you are, the other apprentice meowed mockingly. *Maybe you should just give up and come to me. You're bound to, eventually.*

"Moonpaw?" Jayfeather's voice came from behind her, and Moonpaw jumped, then turned to face him.

"I didn't do it on purpose," she blurted. It seemed so important, suddenly, that Jayfeather know that. She didn't want him to think ill of her.

"I never supposed you did," he responded. "But I thought you were intelligent enough to know not to train with your claws out. Are you more foolish than I imagined, or is something going on?"

"I . . ." Moonpaw didn't want to admit to being foolish. She wasn't going to tell him about the other cat, though. If she did, Jayfeather might start believing she was the cat who had a paw in each world.

After waiting a few heartbeats for her answer, Jayfeather went on. "The first time you slept in the medicine den, after you started sleepwalking, something—maybe some*one*—was in the den with us. In *your* nest." He paused, his sightless eyes turned on her thoughtfully, and Moonpaw's belly tightened with apprehension. Was he going to accuse her? But Jayfeather's voice was gentler than usual when he continued. "What's happening in your dreams that is frightening you so much?"

Moonpaw wanted to confide in Jayfeather, just a little bit. She was sure that if any cat could help her, he could. "I'm just so confused all the time," she meowed, her voice breaking. "I feel . . . divided. Like there's part of me that is separate from the rest of me, and I don't know what that part is doing."

Jayfeather looked concerned. "Are you sleeping?"

Moonpaw ducked her head. "Not really," she admitted. "I'm scared to sleep for more than a bit here and there. I'm too afraid of what I might do when I sleepwalk. And of who might see me doing it. I don't think cats trust me."

Jayfeather paused for a moment, then spoke firmly. "Sleepwalking is perfectly normal. Cats do it all the time, and no sensible cat thinks any worse of them for it. You worry too much about how other cats see you."

Moonpaw ducked her head, embarrassed. Maybe that was true. But she had more to hide, she thought, than most other cats.

Jayfeather cocked his head and, not for the first time, Moonpaw thought that his blind blue eyes saw more than they should. "Is there something else bothering you?"

Moonpaw gazed down at her paws.

Don't tell him anything, the voice meowed. *I don't trust him.*

Moonpaw *did* trust Jayfeather, but she couldn't bring herself to speak.

There was a stretch of silence and then Jayfeather went on, "I want you to come back and sleep in the medicine den again. I promise I will stay by you and make sure nothing happens. In fact, I want you to come now and sleep. You sound exhausted. And you certainly won't be training any more today."

A great longing filled Moonpaw. She'd slept so soundly in the medicine den, and she knew that if Jayfeather said he would stay by her, he would. Nothing could happen to her—and she couldn't do anything to any other cat—not while Jayfeather was there.

But . . .

"**W**hat about Brambleclaw?" she asked. Could the orange cat hurt him?

I'm not going to hurt him! The voice was indignant.

Jayfeather sighed. "Brambleclaw has been sleeping since Tawnypelt's last visit. He's very deeply asleep. He's . . ." He trailed off.

"He's what?" Moonpaw asked, and then winced as a shadow passed over Jayfeather's face.

"He's not doing well," Jayfeather meowed. "We haven't gotten the infection under control, and he's getting weaker."

"I'm sorry," Moonpaw meowed. Brambleclaw was more or less Jayfeather's father, she knew.

Jayfeather flicked his tail, brushing away her sympathy. "Come into the medicine den."

Inside, Alderheart was sorting herbs. "Hello again, Moonpaw," he meowed. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm putting her straight into her nest," Jayfeather told him. "She's still not sleeping properly, and it's leading to mistakes like the one she made in training today. So keep quiet and let her sleep."

Alderheart rolled his eyes. "As a medicine cat, I usually try to be quiet when my patients are sleeping, believe it or not."

"Straight into your nest," Jayfeather told Moonpaw.

Brambleclaw, she saw, was in his own nest near hers. He didn't stir as she approached. His coat looked a little duller than usual, and she hesitated as she got closer.

"Straight in," Jayfeather instructed again, and Moonpaw climbed into the nest and tried to settle. It felt so soft, and she could tell that sleep was waiting for her, waiting to pull her into restful darkness.

But should I sleep? What if something happens? What if Brambleclaw and the other apprentice and I all end up in the same dream again? I don't know how to protect him.

She shivered, and Jayfeather laid a gentle paw on her shoulder. "I'm right here," he meowed. "Nothing will happen."

If Jayfeather says something, it's true. Moonpaw closed her eyes and let sleep take her.

Chapter 16

"You're supposed to be taking things easy. Stay there and let me bring you some prey!"

"Jayfeather told me I could get up today! I don't want to just lie in my nest!"

The fierce whispers broke into Tawnypelt's sleep, and she groaned, not sure at first where she was. Was she in the ShadowClan warriors' den, and was that Bloompetal and Firbark quarreling? Or was she further back, with her kits in the nursery, listening to Tigerkit, Dawnkit, and Flamekit squabbling again?

At the sound of her sleepy groan, the whispers stopped, and she was sure that some young cat was frozen with guilt.

"Sorry, Tawnypelt," one of the voices meowed, and the other chimed in.

"Sorry."

Tawnypelt blinked open her eyes and saw unfamiliar stone walls, a shallow cave.

Oh, yes. The ThunderClan apprentices' den.

"It's all right," she meowed, rolling over to face them. "How is your eye feeling, Goldenpaw?"

The young tom licked at his chest fur, embarrassed, and then looked up with his one exposed green eye. The other was covered thickly with moss and some kind of goo; she didn't want to suggest

that the ThunderClan medicine cats had been overenthusiastic, but the poor cat—she was surprised he could support his own head right now.

"Better, thanks," he meowed.

The third apprentice's nest was still empty, Tawnypelt noticed. It looked unslept in, its smooth moss undented. "Where's Moonpaw?" she asked.

"She doesn't sleep that much," Shinepaw meowed. "And sometimes she goes to the medicine den and sleeps there. I would have thought she would have come last night to at least see how Goldenpaw was, but she didn't." The black-furred apprentice looked a little sour.

"Oh, you know how Moonpaw is," her brother meowed. "She probably feels too guilty about the accident."

She's in the medicine den?

Tawnypelt climbed out of her nest. Crossing the shallow space of the apprentices' den, she peered out through a patch of ferns at the medicine den.

She had no reason to think there was anything wrong with Moonpaw. Nothing except Bluestar's warning about a "two-faced cat," and that could mean anything. Something about hearing that Moonpaw was in the medicine den with Brambleclaw made her uneasy, though. Her littermate seemed so fragile now, despite his broad shoulders and years of experience as a warrior, deputy, and leader.

She slid through the ferns, out of the den, and glanced up at the sun. It was early, not long past dawn. A cold ball of dread gathered in her stomach as she realized that this was her second sunrise in ThunderClan. Tigerstar was expecting her to return today and had warned that if she didn't come then, she might not be welcome to return at all.

Despite that, she wasn't ready to leave. *I can't leave when Brambleclaw is so ill.*

And what right did Tigerstar have to order her back to ShadowClan? He was her leader, of course, and she respected that. But she'd been a loyal warrior to ShadowClan for season upon

season before Tigerstar was even an apprentice, and she'd done her best to hold the Clan together when he was gone.

She deserved respect, too.

I'll go see how Brambleclaw is today, she thought, *and then I'll decide.*

As she entered the medicine den, she could smell the faint rotting smell of infection and fever, a scent she hadn't noticed the previous day. Shocked, she jerked to a halt, and looked at Alderheart, who had just risen to his paws to greet her. "It seems like it's getting worse," she meowed apprehensively, "not better."

Alderheart looked pained. "We're doing our best, I promise."

Tawnypelt brushed her tail gently over his back, feeling like they were sharing the same sorrow. "I know. You and Jayfeather are doing everything you can."

Brambleclaw was asleep, breathing deeply. She took a step toward him and saw Moonpaw in the nest beside his, also sleeping. Jayfeather lay close by, his tail draped across her.

"Don't ask," he meowed, as Tawnypelt hesitated, surprised at the sight. Moonpaw stirred and stretched, then opened her eyes. "How'd you sleep?" he asked her.

"Much better," the apprentice answered. "And nothing—" She caught sight of Tawnypelt and paused, then meowed nervously, "Good morning, Tawnypelt."

"Good morning," Tawnypelt replied. "How are you, Moonpaw?"

"Okay, thanks." Moonpaw looked down at her paws, and then up at Jayfeather. "Can I help at all, Jayfeather? If not, I should go find Sunbeam."

"No, I'll talk to you later," the medicine cat told her. Moonpaw scrambled out of her nest and hurried out of the medicine den. Tawnypelt was left with the distinct impression that she made Moonpaw nervous. Was the apprentice just shy, or was she hiding something?

She thought of asking Jayfeather about Moonpaw, but the medicine cat stood, too. "I'll leave you, if you don't mind. Alderheart will be here. If Brambleclaw wakes up, tell him I'll bring him some fresh-kill soon."

"Of course," Tawnypelt meowed. Putting Moonpaw out of her mind for now, she padded over and sat next to Brambleclaw's nest. She tried to be quiet, but he opened his eyes as she sat. "Hi, there," she meowed.

Brambleclaw blinked, sleepy. "Tawnypelt," he mumbled. "It's good to see you. How are Rowanclaw and the kits?"

Tawnypelt's heart sank. "You're thinking about a long time ago," she meowed gently. "Rowanclaw's gone now. Our son, Tigerheart, is ShadowClan's leader. Tigerstar."

Brambleclaw looked dazed. "Tigerstar? No, Tigerstar was killed. Scourge killed him. I remember."

"Long ago," Tawnypelt agreed. *What is wrong with Brambleclaw?* "But that was the first Tigerstar, our father. This one is my kit."

There was a long, silent moment when Brambleclaw just stared at her, uncomprehending, and then he blinked again and brightened. "Oh, yes, Tigerstar! I'm sorry, Tawnypelt, I don't know what I was thinking. I'm just so sleepy, I've been deep in dreams since you visited yesterday."

Tawnypelt relaxed. Brambleclaw was back with her. It had just taken him a few heartbeats to wake up. "It's okay," she told him. "You were half-asleep. How are you feeling today?"

Brambleclaw shifted in his nest and grimaced slightly with pain. "My leg gets worse and worse. It doesn't seem like anything Jayfeather and Alderheart do helps much."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tawnypelt meowed. She tried to think of something cheerful to say. "Jayfeather told me that he'll bring you some fresh-kill when he comes back."

With a sigh, Brambleclaw lowered his head to rest tiredly on the side of the nest. "I don't have much of an appetite lately. And so many cats drop in with fresh-kill for me. It's kind of them, of course."

"It'd good to know that so many cats care about you and want to spend time with you, though," Tawnypelt suggested.

"ThunderClan is full of good Clanmates," Brambleclaw agreed sleepily. "I hope I can be here to see all the things Squirrelstar will

do as leader."

"I'm sure you will." Tawnypelt felt like her heart was breaking.

"And the orange cat comes and wants to play with me," Brambleclaw mumbled.

"Who?" Tawnypelt tried to think of an orange cat who would want to *play*. Not Sparkpelt, surely. Young Moonpaw? She was partly orange, anyway.

"I don't know," Brambleclaw meowed. "I never met her before I came here."

T*hat's strange.* "Moonpaw?" Tawnypelt suggested.

Brambleclaw flicked his tail impatiently. "No, not Moonpaw. I think she knows her, though."

Was this a real cat? Brambleclaw's eyes were dreamy and a little glazed, and something lurched inside Tawnypelt's chest. She couldn't tell if Brambleclaw was lucid or not.

"She wants to play with you?" she asked gently, trying to remember if there was an apprentice, or maybe an older kit, in ThunderClan that she hadn't seen yet.

"She's quite sweet, really. But . . ." Brambleclaw paused and then shuddered. "Sometimes I look up and we're in the Dark Forest. She doesn't seem to notice. It has to be a dream, doesn't it?"

"It sounds like—" Tawnypelt began, but Brambleclaw went on.

"Because sometimes Snowtuft is there, too." He turned a worried gaze upon her. "That can't be right, can it? He died. I mean, again, after he was dead all along, and there's no coming back from that. Is there?" He worked his paws anxiously against the moss of his nest, and then stopped, pulling back his injured paw with a pained grunt.

"I don't know," Tawnypelt told him. "Please, try not to worry. I think it must be a dream." She didn't know who Snowtuft was. Brambleclaw had told her very little about his time trapped in the Dark Forest, held prisoner by Ashfur while Ashfur inhabited his body in the living world.

"They can't make me go back, can they?" he meowed suddenly. His eyes were wide and wild. "I *won't* relive that. It was bad enough that I lived through it once." He thrashed his tail against the edge of his nest.

Tawnypelt rose to her paws, alarmed. "Brambleclaw, please calm down," she meowed. "It was only a dream. You must be calm."

But Brambleclaw's eyes were pleading now. "I won't have to do it again, will I? Tawnypelt?"

"No, no, of course not." She hurried to reassure him. *What am I supposed to do?*

Gently, Alderheart pushed past her, carrying a dock leaf with some seeds on it. "It's all right, Brambleclaw," he meowed gently. "Lap these up and they'll help you sleep without dreams."

Brambleclaw gave the dock leaf a confused glance and then bent his head obediently to lick up the seeds.

"That's right." Alderheart gave a soothing purr. "Dreamless sleep, so your body can fight off the illness. You'll feel better soon."

Tawnypelt and Alderheart watched as Brambleclaw resettled himself in his nest. Her littermate was shaking, just a little, Tawnypelt realized. He cast her an embarrassed glance and muttered, "Sorry, Tawnypelt. I didn't want you to see me like this."

Does that mean this has happened before?

"It's okay," Tawnypelt tried to make her voice as calm and reassuring as Alderheart's. "Close your eyes and rest. I'll come back when you wake up."

Brambleclaw shut his eyes obediently. He was still shaking, but as she watched, he stilled, his body relaxing. Side by side, Tawnypelt and Alderheart watched as his breathing slowed and deepened, until he was fully asleep.

"What was that?" Tawnypelt whispered.

"Come outside," Alderheart murmured back, and Tawnypelt followed him out of the medicine den. Outside, Alderheart looked

around and then beckoned her to the edge of the clearing, out of earshot of any other cat.

Alderheart spoke first. "I'm worried that Brambleclaw is ill enough that he's walking between the worlds of the living and the dead. He's clearly reliving his experience in the Dark Forest."

"You think he's walking in two worlds?" *A paw in each world.* But Tawnypelt shook off the idea. Brambleclaw would never be called a "two-faced cat."

"My worry is that's how Ashfur invaded Brambleclaw before," Alderheart meowed frankly. "He weakened him to the point that his spirit left his body, and then he took over."

"Ashfur's dead. More dead, I mean," Tawnypelt meowed. "And Brambleclaw doesn't have nine lives anymore, so it wouldn't work."

"There are other evil cats," Alderheart responded glumly. "And I don't think we can predict everything."

Ashfur's plan had only worked because Brambleclaw had died, Tawnypelt knew. And Ashfur had stolen Brambleclaw's next life, slipping into his body before his heart began to beat again. She didn't think it could happen without a leader's multiple lives. She was more worried about what Alderheart's concern showed about Brambleclaw's condition.

"You think Brambleclaw will die?" she asked bluntly. It seemed impossible. *We lost so much time together, living in different Clans. Could I really lose him forever, so soon?*

"I hope not," Alderheart meowed. "He could easily rally. He just needs to beat this infection." He looked agonized, and Tawnypelt hated herself for her words. *It's too cruel to ask a son if his father will die.*

"You're right, of course," she told him with as much cheerfulness as she could muster. She rubbed her cheek against his. "You should get some rest while you can. You have to stay healthy to care for your Clan."

It was past sunhigh by the time Tawnypelt felt ready to leave the apprentices' den again. Thank StarClan none of the apprentices had returned and she had had it to herself. The sorrow and worry she felt had been too deep for her to be able to chat with the other cats of ThunderClan, even Squirrelstar, not until she had a little while to sit alone and think and grieve for how much her brother was suffering.

When she emerged, Brackenfur called her name and gestured her over with a wave of his golden-brown tabby tail. "Tawnypelt! Come join us. We have a nice big rabbit Shinepaw caught."

"I really shouldn't." Tawnypelt looked longingly at the rabbit. She was quite hungry, she realized. "I told Squirrelstar I'd be happy to earn my way and join hunting patrols while I was here, and I haven't done a thing to help ThunderClan."

"Don't be silly," Thornclaw told her. "You're helping Brambleclaw keep his spirits up, and that's all any cat in ThunderClan wants of you. Plus"—he lowered his voice to a dramatic whisper—"we have the best hunters right now that ThunderClan's ever had. Plenty of fresh-kill, and no one's counting."

All the elders nodded. Touched at their enthusiasm for her company, Tawnypelt sat down beside them. "If you're sure," she meowed, and bent to take a bite of rabbit.

The cats ate in companionable silence for a few heartbeats, and then Cloudtail licked the blood from his whiskers and spoke. "Thank you for sharing your vision at the Gathering. I know Tigerstar was angry, but I think we all needed to know."

"You all believed me?" Tawnypelt looked hopefully around the circle of elders, all of whom met her eyes trustingly. *My own Clan wouldn't believe me. Not even my son, my leader.*

"Of course," Brightheart meowed, and the others nodded.

"Especially the part about the eldest trees in the forest seeing what the fresh seedlings cannot." Cloudtail gave a purr of amusement. "Some of these young bee-brains wouldn't have survived what we did, fighting against Tigerstar and Scourge."

Brightheart nudged him sharply, and he jumped and gave a lick of embarrassment at his ruff. "Sorry, Tawnypelt," he added.

He'd clearly forgotten for a moment that *Tawnypelt*, at least, had not fought against Tigerstar, although she'd battled Scourge when BloodClan tried to take over the forest in their youth. Tawnypelt had already been part of ShadowClan.

"The younger warriors aren't so bad," Brightheart meowed. "They're good Clanmates, and some of them were brave enough to go into the Dark Forest to fight Ashfur and save Squirrelstar and Brambleclaw. And they've begun some real changes in the Clans. I think the new warrior code is an improvement."

"I agree," Tawnypelt meowed. "My son's son, Shadowsight, almost died to defeat Ashfur. He's one of the bravest cats I know. But not even he is quite sure if he believes in the threat Bluestar told me of. And Tigerstar certainly isn't."

"I think this is a bigger problem than any of the leaders understand," Brackenfur agreed. He turned worried amber eyes on Tawnypelt. "Do you really believe the Clans might have to leave the lake?"

Tawnypelt hunched her shoulders. *Surely we'll find some other way to contact StarClan. Surely that's not what Bluestar meant.* "I hope not."

Brackenfur's tail twitched worriedly. "I'm not sure I have another move in me."

"I can't imagine leaving the lake now either," Thornclaw agreed.

"But what would you do instead?" Tawnypelt asked. "If the Clans left, would you still want to stay?" She felt a twinge of sadness in her heart as she remembered the four warriors who stayed behind when the Clans departed the forest. One of them had been Thornclaw and Brackenfur's mother, Frostfur.

Thornclaw and Brackenfur exchanged glances. "Perhaps we'll go to the horseplace and ask those cats to let us join them?" Thornclaw suggested.

"Or survive as loners?" Brackenfur meowed. "We're skilled hunters, and we could stay in ThunderClan's camp and look after each other."

"Without StarClan?" Tawnypelt was shocked. *Without StarClan, we're not Clan cats. Would he really want to be a loner, or a barn cat?*

Cloudtail snorted. "I didn't believe in StarClan for a lot of my life," he meowed. "So much has happened that now I have to admit they exist, but I'm not sure they've ever made my life any *better*. Things might be more peaceful without them."

"I don't agree with that," Brightheart answered. "I have always believed in StarClan and know they watch over me. But I wouldn't leave the Clans without Cloudtail."

The two exchanged a loving look, their tails twining.

Everything is going to change. Tawnypelt would lead the Clans as best she could, if StarClan required it of her: As Bluestar had told her, she did not have to be *the* leader to be *a* leader. But would Brambleclaw be well enough to travel with them, if the Clans had to leave the lake? Would she be leaving him behind?

"There are enough of us who don't believe we need StarClan, or who wouldn't leave our homes for them," Cloudtail was saying. "Maybe we could even begin a new Clan if the others left. LakeClan!" He purred with laughter, and the others joined in.

But Tawnypelt couldn't bring herself to laugh. *If the Clans left, they really might not join us.* Without their elders, ThunderClan would lose not only their home if they left the lake, but also Clanmates, and much of their connection to their history. *Would Squirrelstar be the only ThunderClan cat who remembers the forest?*

There must be other Clan cats who felt the same way about leaving. All the Clans would lose something precious.

Bluestar called it the end of an era. Tawnypelt felt that it was impossible for her to welcome any of the changes that must be coming. She eyed the sky, where the sun was moving slowly down toward the horizon. Tigerstar was expecting her back before the next sunrise.

But I won't be there, she decided. She wasn't leaving Brambleclaw, not when he was sick and frightened. She wasn't

ready to return to ShadowClan.

Tigerstar will have to decide for himself what he wants to do about that.

Chapter 17

O*ne paw in front of the other.* Starlingpaw plodded along grimly. He was aching all over. It was just past sunhigh, and he was no longer marveling at the mountain peaks that towered high above them, the farthest away disappearing into mist, or at the strange beauty of the sheer rock walls and narrow passages, or at the way ragged thornbushes and spindly plants thrust their way through the cracks in the rocks beneath his paws. At this point, the landscape all seemed equally hostile, and he only wanted the day to end so that the Clan cats could find some safe and sheltered spot to rest until morning.

Following Crowfeather in single file, the cats climbed over another wall of rock, their claws scrabbling against it to try to find purchase, and leaped down onto more rock. He missed the soft grass of SkyClan's territory. Beginning to trudge forward again, his eyes on the path before him, Starlingpaw bumped into Nectarsong and stumbled. Ivypool steadied him, her flank solid and reassuring against his.

Looking up, he realized that the rushing in his ears was not the wind, but a huge wall of water, tumbling endlessly from the top of the sheer rock wall ahead to churn the water of the pool directly before them. Spray rose from where the water thundered into the pool, catching the golden light of the sun and dazzling his eyes.

There seemed to be no way out of this small valley other than the way they had just come in. *Did Crowfeather make a mistake?* Starlingpaw inwardly groaned at the idea of retracing their paw steps for StarClan knew how far.

Crowfeather, his tail held high, seemed unbothered. He gave a peremptory yowl. "Hello? Cats of the Tribe? Do you hear me?"

For a few breaths, nothing happened. Then Hootwhisker gasped. Starlingpaw followed the WindClan warrior's gaze and saw two cats, a bit smaller than most of the Clan cats, thin and wiry, who had quietly appeared beside the waterfall. They were both a brownish gray, their pelts blending into the rocks and earth around them. Taking a closer look, Starlingpaw realized their coats were streaked with mud.

One of the mountain cats leaped gracefully off the rocks by the waterfall and padded toward them, the other trailing behind. "Crowfeather? Is that you?" She spoke the same language that the Clan cats did, but with an unfamiliar lilt to her words that made Starlingpaw very aware that they were far from home.

Crowfeather stepped forward to greet the she-cat, touching her muzzle with his nose. "Hello, Moss. It's been a long time, and I'm glad to see that you're well. We've come to consult with Stoneteller. Can we speak to him?"

"We're always happy to greet cats from the Clans that live by the lake," she meowed. Looking around at the Clan cats, she gestured with her tail to the cat standing a little behind her. He was smaller and slighter, looking about Starlingpaw's own age. "This is Rain Running Over Rocks. He's a to-be. And I am Moss That Grows by River. You may call us Rain and Moss."

"To-be" must be what they call an apprentice, Starlingpaw thought. He wished that Crowfeather had told them more about the Tribe cats.

Crowfeather introduced his companions. When he got to Shadowsight, Moss looked pleased. "I thought I recognized you! You were just a kit when you were here before. How are your kin?"

Shadowsight dipped his head politely. “Very well, thank you.” At the surprised looks from the other Clan cats, he meowed. “Dovewing and Tawnypelt brought me here when I was a kit. The Tribe cats were very kind to me.” He added to Moss, “Ivypool is Dovewing’s sister.”

Moss turned to Ivypool. “I liked Dovewing a lot. It’s a pleasure to meet more of her kin.”

Starlingpaw saw Hootwhisker and Crowfeather exchange looks and Nectarsong shrug at Fidgetflake’s confused glance. Apparently, the other Clans hadn’t known that the three ShadowClan cats had come here. *It’s so weird how the Clans keep secrets from each other!*

The younger cat, Rain Running Over Rocks, edged closer to Starlingpaw, his amber eyes wide. “Are you a to-be, too?” he asked.

“We say *apprentice*, but I think it means the same thing,” Starlingpaw answered. “You’re learning to be a cave-guard or a prey-hunter, right?”

Rain nodded. “I will be a cave-guard when I have learned all that Moss and the other cave-guards have to teach me.”

“So you learn from all the cave-guards?” *That’s interesting.* Starlingpaw couldn’t imagine *all* the SkyClan warriors teaching him, but maybe there were fewer Tribe cats. “Just Nectarsong teaches me; she’s my mentor.”

Rain greeted Nectarsong politely, bowing his head. “I knew about mentors already,” he explained. “Stormfur has told me about the Clans by the lake.”

“Stormfur is still here?” Crowfeather asked, looking relieved. “It’ll be good to see him.”

Moss headed toward the waterfall, beckoning with her tail for the Clan cats to follow her.

“Who’s Stormfur?” Starlingpaw murmured to Nectarsong as they walked.

Nectarsong shook her head, but Ivypool answered. “He was a Clan cat once, but he mated with a Tribe cat and has been a member of the Tribe for a long time.”

Wow. Starlingpaw looked around at the torrential water thundering down the mountainside, the long stretches of bare rock, the huge unfamiliar birds circling far overhead. How did a cat of the Clans end up deciding that this was home?

Moss disappeared behind the waterfall, followed by Crowfeather. Starlingpaw hesitated, looking at the other cats for reassurance. Shadowsight, Hootwhisker, and Ivypool seemed unbothered, but Fidgetflake's and Duskfur's eyes were wide, and Nectarsong's fur was bristling nervously.

"It's okay," Rain told them all. "There's a ledge behind the waterfall that leads to the Cave of Rushing Water. It's dry inside." He followed Crowfeather, beckoning them on with a wave of his tail.

One by one, the cats leaped onto the rocks beside the waterfall and headed behind it. "Go ahead of me, Starlingpaw," Nectarsong instructed at last. "And be careful—that ledge looks slippery."

As they stepped onto the ledge, the falling water was barely a tail-length away and the noise was deafening. Sunlight shone through the water, throwing strange shadows and spots of light across the thin ledge of cold, wet stone. Despite Nectarsong's warning, Starlingpaw forgot to watch where he was placing his paws and instead looked up and up, trying to see exactly where the stone ended and the falling water began.

His paw slipped, and for an endless moment he lurched toward the water, two of his paws already off the rock and sliding toward the waterfall. In that heartbeat, devastated, he imagined being crushed beneath the falling water. *I'll never prove that I was more than the cat who caused Kitescratch's death. . . . I'll never help save the Clans.*

Then teeth fastened in the fur at the nape of his neck, and Nectarsong jerked him back onto the ledge. "I told you, *be careful*, Starlingpaw!" she meowed, sounding angry and frightened.

"Sorry, sorry." Starlingpaw staggered and for a moment thought he would fall again; then he found his balance, his heart pounding.

Ahead was a gaping hole that must lead into the Tribe's cave. From here all Starlingpaw could see was darkness. His paws slowed even as Rain entered the cave, waving his tail to urge them on.

"It's okay, Starlingpaw," Nectarsong reassured him. "The Tribe cats have been friends to the Clans for many seasons. We're safe here." Starlingpaw nodded and, his mouth dry with nerves, padded forward.

The cave they entered was huge. It was lit only by the wavering light of the sun shining through the waterfall, so the highest part of its roof and its farthest edges disappeared into shadow. From the distant ceiling hung great pointed fangs of rock. A narrow stream ran through the cave, ending in a shallow pool near its center. A few mountain cats, their fur streaked with mud like Moss's and Rain's, were drinking from the stream, while others shared tongues or chatted together in various parts of the cave. As he watched, two kits, followed by their mother, ran out of a side passage that must lead to another cave.

A broad-shouldered gray tom got to his paws as the Clan cats entered the cave and yowled a welcome, sounding surprised but delighted. While his fur had patches of mud like a Tribe cat, he spoke like a cat of the Clans. "Crowfeather!" He padded forward to greet them. "And a whole patrol of Clan cats! I hope nothing's wrong."

Crowfeather grimaced. "I've got private Clan business to discuss with your Stoneteller, but there's no emergency," he meowed. "As you chose to leave the Clans, I'm sure you understand I'd rather not share the details with you."

Brushing his tail affectionately across Crowfeather's side, Stormfur gave a purr of laughter. "You haven't changed a bit, Crowfeather," he meowed. "Keep your secrets, then, but introduce me to your companions."

Other cats came to join them, and Starlingpaw's head spun as he tried to keep track of all the cats he met in the cheerful commotion: Stormfur's mate, Brook, who had been born in the Tribe but had spent a few seasons living with ThunderClan and was soon chatting with Ivypool about cats they both knew well; several of Stormfur

and Brook's sons and daughters; other cats eager to renew their acquaintance with Crowfeather or comment on how much Shadowsight had grown; as well as younger cats curious about the Clans they had only heard of.

"SkyClan cats, of course," Stormfur meowed warmly when he was introduced to Starlingpaw, Nectarsong, and Fidgetflake. "There were only four Clans by the lake when I lived there, but Graystripe told me all about your Clan's arrival." He looked back to Ivypool. "How is Graystripe?"

Ivypool hesitated, and Stormfur's expression crumbled. "I'm very sorry, Stormfur," she meowed. "Graystripe died several leaf-bares ago. He was a true warrior, and all the Clans honor him. You know how much he was admired in ThunderClan. He led us when neither Bramblestar nor Squirrelstar could, and he helped to save the Clans from the Dark Forest."

Stormfur looked more alarmed than ever. "Squirrelstar is leader now? Is Bramblestar dead as well?"

"Oh, no," Ivypool hastened to reassure him. "Brambleclaw gave up his leadership and retired to the elders' den."

"Well, that's something." Stormfur stared down at his paws for a few breaths before he spoke again. "I knew Graystripe couldn't live much longer. He had a long life and was a noble cat. I'm glad I got to see him one more time."

Brook brushed a comforting tail across his back. "Maybe we'll journey back to the Clans one day," she meowed. "You could meet your other kin in ThunderClan."

"**C**rowfeather and Shadowkit," a new voice meowed. "And cats of the Clans."

Crowfeather turned to greet the cat who had just emerged from another side tunnel. "Stoneteller."

As Crowfeather introduced the cats who had traveled with him, Stoneteller gazed at them attentively with sharp amber eyes.

"We've traveled here to ask you to speak to the Tribe of Endless Hunting for us," Crowfeather meowed. "Specifically—"

Stoneteller silenced him with a wave of his tail. "I have some idea of what you've come for," he meowed. "I've been receiving signs from the Tribe of Endless Hunting that I realize now must have foretold your coming here. I'll try to help, but first let us all share prey in celebration of the long friendship between the Clans and the Tribe of Rushing Water."

Crowfeather looked irritated at having to wait to discuss his mission but nodded. As the Tribe cats headed for a fresh-kill pile toward the back of the cave, Crowfeather swung toward the Clan cats. "They *share* prey here," he hissed. "Watch and figure it out. Don't embarrass me."

Thanks a lot, Crowfeather. Why couldn't he just tell them exactly what they were supposed to do? Starlingpaw saw Nectarsong and Fidgetflake exchange annoyed murmurs, while Hootwhisker looked apologetically at the others. Ivypool rolled her eyes.

Rain came over, carrying a pigeon and another bird Starlingpaw didn't recognize, and dropped them in front of Starlingpaw. "Would you like to share prey?" he asked shyly. "I'd love to hear more about the Clans."

"Sure, thanks," Starlingpaw meowed. As he and Rain settled side by side, Starlingpaw looked around anxiously, wondering what Crowfeather had wanted them to watch for. A pair of Tribe cats were nearby, and, as he watched, each took a bite of the prey in front of them, then slid that prey to the other cat.

Oh, okay. Starlingpaw took a bite of the pigeon and pushed it over to Rain, hoping that he was doing the right thing. Rain accepted the pigeon, took one bite of the other bird, and gave it to Starlingpaw. It was a speckled gray bird with a tuft of feathers on the top of its head. Starlingpaw bit in, pausing as an unfamiliar taste flooded his mouth. It was definitely bird, but a bit richer, a little like rabbit. "What *is* this?" he asked.

"It's grouse," Rain answered, looking amused. "Do you like it?"

"I do!" Starlingpaw took another, larger bite. "What else do you hunt? I bet we have prey you don't eat, too."

They slipped easily into conversation, comparing prey and territories, and Starlingpaw relaxed. Crowfeather had been right. *In*

the end, the Tribe cats are cats, just like we are.

As he finished the last bite of grouse, Starlingpaw noticed Crowfeather and Stoneteller slipping quietly into one of the side tunnels. He figured they must be going to consult with the Tribe of Endless Hunting.

Why didn't Stoneteller let Crowfeather talk about why we've come? Did the Tribe's leader know something that he only wanted to tell Crowfeather? Or was there some specific cat he was wary of? Covertly, Starlingpaw glanced toward where Fidgetflake was sharing prey with a small, long-tailed Tribe cat.

Maybe the Tribe of Endless Hunting had warned Stoneteller about Fidgetflake? Starlingpaw tried to remember if the Tribe's leader had looked at Fidgetflake any differently than he had the rest of the Clan cats. What if Stoneteller was giving Crowfeather secret information about the two-faced cat right now?

I wish I knew what they were saying, Starlingpaw thought, looking longingly at the tunnel down which the two cats had disappeared.

"Starlingpaw?" Rain broke off the story he was telling about accompanying a hunting party through heavy rains and gave him an inquiring look. "Is something wrong?"

"**N**o, everything's fine," Starlingpaw assured him. "Um, I'll be right back, okay?"

Getting to his paws, he edged around the other cats, sticking to the shadows near the sides of the cave. He didn't think any cat noticed him. Even Rain had turned away to chat with another pair of Tribe cats. Leaping over the small stream, Starlingpaw made his way to the other side of the cave and peered into the passage down which Crowfeather and the Stoneteller had disappeared. He could see a trace of light from the other end, as if sunlight shone into the next cave. Starlingpaw listened hard but, to his disappointment, he could hear nothing but the faint sound of dripping water.

"Starlingpaw!" The sharp voice came from behind him, and he jumped. He'd had his ears turned toward the tunnel, listening so

hard in that direction that he hadn't heard paws padding up behind him. He whipped around to find Nectarsong, who looked annoyed.

"Why are you lurking over here by yourself?" she asked. "We're guests in this territory; we don't want the Tribe to think we're spying on them."

"I . . ." Starlingpaw looked down the dark passage again. "I saw Crowfeather and Stoneteller go in there."

"I'm glad to hear it," Nectarsong meowed crisply. "Since the whole reason we've come all this way is to get advice from Stoneteller and the Tribe of Endless Hunting."

"Well, why aren't the rest of us hearing that advice?" Starlingpaw complained. "Why only Crowfeather? All the Clans sent representatives here."

Nectarsong flicked her tail. "Maybe because he's been here before and Stoneteller knows him? If Stoneteller can help us, I don't care *who* he talks to. And neither should you." Looking Starlingpaw up and down, she got a teasing glint in her eye. "Or maybe the Teller of the Pointed Stones was put off by that white tuft on the end of your tail. Every cat knows that's the sign of a trickster!"

"It is not!" Starlingpaw tucked his tail between his legs, and Nectarsong gave a short purr of laughter.

"I'm only joking," she assured him. "In any case, come with me. Some of the Tribe cats have invited us on a hunt!"

She looked thrilled at the idea, but Starlingpaw hesitated. He'd had a rest and a meal, but his paws still hurt from their long journey. And he wanted to lurk by the passage, just in case he could hear something. *Like maybe Stoneteller telling Crowfeather who the two-faced cat is. . . .*

But he could see at a glance that Nectarsong wasn't going to let him out of this. "Come on," she meowed, gently pushing him toward the cave entrance. "We're going to learn how the Tribe manages to catch prey way up here in the mountains. You might never have another chance like this!"

It does sound interesting. Starlingpaw brightened, his paw pads aching less as he carefully crossed the ledge out of the cave. Maybe he'd find out what Stoneteller had said to Crowfeather when they returned.

Outside, Hootwhisker was waiting for them, accompanied by two Tribe cats: Brook Where Small Fish Swim, who was Stormfur's mate, and one of their sons, Feather of Flying Hawk—Brook and Feather, they told the Clan cats to call them. "We're just waiting for a couple of cave-guards," Brook meowed cheerfully. "I want to show you a new hunting technique we're trying."

Feather nodded to them without speaking, and Starlingpaw noticed he had a small stone clenched between his teeth. Did the Tribe hunt by dropping stones on prey from above?

Before he could ask, two more cats joined them. Starlingpaw recognized Stormfur and Brook's daughter, Breeze That Rustles the Leaves. Her companion was Thorn That Grows in Cleft, who had greeted the Clan cats with pleasure. "Why do cave-guards come hunting?" Starlingpaw asked curiously.

"We keep an eye out for eagles and other dangers and protect the hunters," Breeze explained, falling into step behind him as the hunting party climbed up a narrow winding path away from the Tribe's cave.

Starlingpaw gave the sky an uneasy glance. He'd seen large birds circling overhead, but how dangerous could a bird be to a cat? As the path widened, Breeze came to walk beside him, and Starlingpaw could see that she and Thorn were keeping a wary eye on the sky.

"Here," Brook meowed, stopping in a place where the path had broadened and become almost a platform of rock, big enough for all six cats to stand on easily. A few scraggly bushes and thin grass grew out of crevices on one side. "They'll fly right above here."

"There's a colony of jackdaws living farther up the mountain," Feather explained after dropping the stone onto the ground. "They're tasty to eat, but it's not worth climbing that far. But we've noticed that they *love* shiny things."

"And so . . ." Brook turned the stone this way and that with her paw. Suddenly it caught the light, and Starlingpaw saw that a stripe

ran through the center of the small rock, a stripe that reflected the light as strongly as water might, flashing a signal into the sky.

"We think this is going to work," Feather meowed. He and Brook exchanged excited glances. "Prey is often scarce here; we're always working out new ways to catch it. Now let's hide and see if this shine is enough to attract a jackdaw."

Huddled under one of the scraggly bushes at the edge of the rock, Starlingpaw kept his eyes fixed on the sky. Could this possibly work? He shifted on his paws and Nectarsong whispered, "Be still!"

Starlingpaw's legs were half-asleep and tingling by the time they heard raucous croaking overhead. Peering up, he saw two black birds circling lower and lower. They looked a bit like the crows he was familiar with from SkyClan territory. They swooped even lower, their eyes fixed on the shiny rock.

As the birds descended, Brook and Feather burst into motion. The smaller jackdaw's talons had barely touched the rock when Brook slammed the bird against the stone behind it and bit at its throat. Feather didn't have quite as good an angle, and, as he pounced, the larger jackdaw flapped its wings, trying to fly away. The gray tom managed to catch onto one wing with his paws. The bird screeched and flapped its other wing, struggling.

Seeing an opening, Starlingpaw leaped and landed hard on the bird's free wing. He bit down, warm blood flooding his mouth, and killed it quickly. Automatically, he muttered, "Thank you, StarClan, for this prey."

"Well done!" Feather meowed. Starlingpaw fluffed his fur proudly, a warm glow filling his chest.

After hiding the fresh-kill in a rock crevice a little lower down, they repositioned the shiny stone to catch the sun again, and, after a long wait, they caught another jackdaw. This time Hootwhisker and Nectarsong brought the large bird down, looking pleased with themselves.

Thorn glanced up at the sky, where the sun was slipping toward the horizon. "We'd better head back to the cave," he meowed.

As they started back down the twisting mountain path, Feather fell into step beside Starlingpaw. "You did well," he commented. "What

is prey-catching like by your Clan's lake?"

"We have more room to run," Starlingpaw told him. "And there are more trees and grass and earth for prey to live in." He described the gentle hills and valleys of SkyClan's territory, divided by trickling streams, and the mice, voles, and small birds that were their most common prey.

"It sounds like rich hunting grounds," Feather meowed politely. "You must be very proud of your home."

"I am," Starlingpaw replied, and then caught his breath. *What if Crowfeather doesn't learn anything from the Tribe? What if we have to leave the lake?*

"Are you all right?" Feather asked, looking at him closely.

"I . . . well . . ." Starlingpaw took a quick look around. He hadn't actually been *told* not to discuss the Clans' business with the Tribe cats, so it was probably okay, right? Once they left, it wouldn't matter what Feather knew. Nectarsong and Hootwhisker were both out of earshot, anyway, chatting happily with Brook. "We're here because we can't get to the Moonpool anymore. It's the place where our medicine cats talk to StarClan, like Stoneteller talks to your Tribe of Endless Hunting. If we can't get to the Moonpool, some cats say we might have to look for a new home."

"That's terrible," Feather meowed sympathetically. His amber eyes were warm and interested.

"So Crowfeather is getting Stoneteller's advice, and he's also hoping the Tribe of Endless Hunting can contact StarClan and see if they have any messages for us. There's a cat who's supposed to walk in both hunting grounds."

Feather nodded. "My father Stormfur's sister, Feathertail. She was a cat of RiverClan, but she died saving the Tribe, so we honor her as one of us as well. I'm named in her memory."

"There's also a ShadowClan warrior named Tawnypelt—"

"I know Tawnypelt," Feather interjected.

"Well, Tawnypelt had a vision about a peril befalling the Clans, and about needing to beware a two-faced cat. So I'm trying to figure out who that cat could be. Do you think Stoneteller will know?"

"I'm sure if he does, he will tell Crowfeather," Feather answered, looking a little amused. "It doesn't seem like it needs to be your burden."

"It *does*! Tawnypelt wants me to help. I'm the only one who can."

Feather looked at him dubiously. "Tawnypelt told you that you should figure out who the two-faced cat is? Why you, an apprentice from another Clan?"

Starlingpaw's fur fluffed defensively. "She didn't exactly say I should find the two-faced cat. But she did say I was the only one who could help, and that *must* be what she meant. Do you think that Stoneteller will be able to tell if it's one of the cats who came with us?" It was on the tip of Starlingpaw's tongue to accuse Fidgetflake, but he swallowed the words. It didn't seem fair, not when Starlingpaw didn't have any solid evidence.

He realized that Feather had stopped in his tracks, looking shocked. "You suspect that one of your fellow travelers, another cat of the Clans, is a traitor? That's a very serious accusation."

"I mean . . ." Starlingpaw licked at his ruff, confused and flustered. "I don't know anything. I'm just trying to figure out who it is."

Feather shook his head. "This kind of suspicion, without a real reason behind it, could destroy the Tribe—or the Clans. Cats who hunt and live together must trust each other. Have you ever thought that by thinking so poorly of your companions while pretending to support them, perhaps *you* are the two-faced cat?"

Starlingpaw gasped, the fur rising on his shoulders. "I'm not a bad cat!"

Feather began to walk again, and Starlingpaw followed. "I didn't say that you are," the prey-hunter replied. "But perhaps you should focus on becoming the best warrior you can. That would be a better way for a young cat like you to strengthen his Clan. Don't waste your time looking for a traitor who might not even exist."

Starlingpaw felt warm with embarrassment. He trailed after Feather silently. Was the Tribe prey-hunter right? *But I'm the only*

one who can help.

Or am I? He almost stopped short at the new idea, then hurried to catch up again. When Tawnypelt had told him that, she'd been feverish and ill. The ShadowClan warrior had stared right at him, but was it possible she hadn't seen him? Tawnypelt hadn't said anything to him about it since then.

When she'd told the Gathering about her vision, Tawnypelt hadn't mentioned Starlingpaw at all. He'd thought she was keeping it quiet because she didn't want the Clans to know about his role, or maybe because he was an apprentice and she was trying to protect him.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe Tawnypelt hadn't mentioned him because Starlingpaw *wasn't* special. Maybe her message had never been meant for him. His mouth grew dry at the idea, and suddenly his stomach turned at the scent of the prey he'd been so proud to help catch.

As the cats climbed the last few tail-lengths toward the cave, Starlingpaw felt sick. Were the Clans really relying on him, or was he just a fool?

As soon as they entered the Tribe's cave, Crowfeather hurried to greet them, Ivypool, Duskfur, and the two medicine cats close behind. Starlingpaw tried to guess what had happened by Crowfeather's expression, but the WindClan deputy just seemed impatient, as usual.

"Now that we're all together, can you tell us what you learned?" Shadowsight asked.

"Yes." Crowfeather led them to the side of the cave, away from the Tribe cats. His voice was level, but he looked troubled. "It's mostly good news. Stoneteller was able to guide me to see Feathertail. She's just the same. . . ." His voice trailed off, his blue eyes sad, and Starlingpaw remembered what Tree had told him about the rumors of Crowfeather's lost love. *Maybe Tree was right!*

"What did she say?" Fidgetflake asked eagerly. Starlingpaw stared at him. Was Fidgetflake just normally worried about the Clans' lack of contact with StarClan, like any medicine cat might be? Or was he hiding something, and wondering if Feathertail knew about it?

Or is Feather right, and I should stop suspecting my Clanmate? Starlingpaw's tail drooped. He was so confused.

"Feathertail told me that all is well in StarClan. They're still watching over us, even though we can't speak to them through the Moonpool." Crowfeather gazed down at his paws. "She said the medicine cats should keep watch for signs StarClan might send, and that this will be a time of great change for the Clans."

"Great change? Did she tell you what was going to happen?" Hootwhisker asked.

Crowfeather shrugged. "Feathertail told me that whether the change is good or bad depends on the choices the Clans make, but that everything will look very different soon."

"Is that all?" Nectarsong asked, and Crowfeather hesitated for a heartbeat, then nodded.

Ivypool sighed. "Just once I'd like to be sure that StarClan has told us all they know."

Shadowsight was looking hopeful. "At least we know that StarClan is still watching over us. We haven't lost them. I believe they will send a vision to one of the medicine cats soon."

"Whatever happens, even if we have to leave the lake, it sounds like the changes that are coming could be good ones," Duskfur noted. "It's a relief to me to know that we're not necessarily headed into darkness."

Starlingpaw didn't know what to think. Like Duskfur and Shadowsight, he was glad to hear that StarClan hadn't abandoned them, and that the changes ahead might not be disastrous after all.

But they hadn't even mentioned the two-faced cat, according to Crowfeather.

Did I misunderstand what Tawnypelt said? He felt weird: sick and sad.

Am I not special after all?

Later that night, Starlingpaw woke up. His shallow nest in the cave floor, padded with a thin layer of moss and feathers, wasn't terribly

comfortable. He'd been tired when he'd climbed in and fallen asleep, but now he could feel every small stone beneath the padding. He rolled over and sat up.

It was dark in the cave, but moonlight streamed in through the falling water at its entrance, throwing wavering pale light and shadow across the floor. It seemed like every other cat was asleep.

Except one.

Crowfeather was sitting just inside the cave entrance, staring out through the falling water as if he could see all the way back to the lake. He looked sad, and as if he was deep in thought.

Starlingpaw wondered what the WindClan deputy was thinking so hard about.

Is there something Crowfeather didn't tell us?

Chapter 18

P*lenty of catmint.* Moonpaw took a long sniff of the sweet herb as she arranged its sprigs in the proper niche. It smelled so good!

Chervil smelled good, too, and she fished out a couple of roots that had been mixed in with the leaves: These ought to be stored separately.

There were decent amounts of dried ragwort, sorrel, chamomile, and feverfew. The herb stores were looking pretty full in general, actually, and Moonpaw knew this was good news: Alderheart and Jayfeather had been stocking up all greenleaf and leaf-fall, drying as much as they could against the cold days of the coming leaf-bare, when it would be hard to find any living plants to harvest.

She tucked a dangling frond of parsley back into its proper place and stepped back to admire her work. The herbs were all neatly sorted into their crevices in the wall of the medicine den, ready to be used. "Jayfeather, I'm done with the herbs," she meowed. "I think you're well stocked for leaf-bare."

"I'll be the judge of that," Jayfeather told her. He finished his examination of the sleeping Brambleclaw and padded over. Running his paw over the crevices, he sniffed at each one to check if the herbs were placed correctly. Moonpaw secretly marveled, as she

often did, at how well the medicine cat clearly tracked where everything was without needing his vision.

I'd never tell him how impressed I am, though, she thought. *He'd probably just hiss at me for even thinking things could be any different.*

Finishing his inspection, Jayfeather sat back. "If Alderheart comes back to camp with the marigold he's gone after, I'll feel as ready for leaf-bare as we can be," he meowed. "You've done well organizing the herbs."

Moonpaw blinked, startled. Jayfeather wasn't *unkind*, not at all, but he rarely bothered with praise. "Thank you," she meowed, then added, "I've been trying to help out as much as I can because I appreciate you letting me stay. I haven't had a bad dream for days, and I've never sleepwalked when I sleep here. Helping in the medicine den is the least I can do."

I haven't heard the voice in my head for days, either, she added silently. Perhaps the other cat was gone for good, scared off by Jayfeather's vigilance.

"I've noticed you've been sleeping well," Jayfeather agreed. "And so I think it's time for you to go back to sleeping in the apprentices' den."

Moonpaw's mouth dropped open. "What? No!" she argued. "I can't leave. I'm *sleeping* here, and that makes everything better. My head's clearer; training is going better. I can't *stop*!" She heard her own yowl turn into a squeak of horror.

"A healthy young cat who's not planning to become a medicine cat can't stay in the medicine den forever," Jayfeather meowed firmly. "Now that you're sleeping better here, it's time to try it in your usual den, with the other apprentices."

Moonpaw felt as if she'd taken a firm kick in her stomach. *The other apprentices!* "Oh, no," she moaned. "Jayfeather, I can't go back to the apprentices' den. I hurt Goldenpaw! He and Shinepaw must be so angry at me!"

Jayfeather sighed. “Thank StarClan I don’t spend my time worrying about the social lives of apprentices, but Goldenpaw has always struck me as a rather easygoing young cat. Do you really think he’ll blame you for an accident?”

“You think he’s not mad at me?” Moonpaw felt a bit hopeful. It was true, Goldenpaw didn’t get angry much. And he must know she hadn’t meant to scratch his eye. She hadn’t trained with the other apprentices since the accident, but Sunbeam didn’t seem angry even though she was Goldenpaw’s mother. She’d been treating Moonpaw the same way she always did.

“I think you should talk to him,” Jayfeather meowed. “You can’t hide out in here forever. Part of being a full warrior is being able to apologize properly and smooth things over with your Clanmates.”

“I guess.” Moonpaw stared down at her paws. She understood what Jayfeather was saying, and it all made sense, really it did, but something inside her was still yowling that this was a bad idea.

Jayfeather heaved a put-upon-sounding sigh. “As for the sleepwalking, if anything happens, let me know. We’ll deal with it. You don’t have to carry your worries all by yourself.”

That was reassuring, but Moonpaw still wanted to argue. Before she could find the right words, there was a hurried pounding of paws outside, and Twigbranch stuck her head in through the medicine den’s entrance. “Jayfeather, come quick,” she meowed, panting. “Fernstripe’s having her kits.”

“How long has she been laboring?” Jayfeather asked, moving swiftly to grab some herbs from the stores. “Borage and chervil,” he muttered, pulling them out.

“I don’t know,” Twigbranch meowed nervously. “Daisy gave her a stick to bite on.”

“Daisy is possibly the only sensible cat in this camp,” Jayfeather muttered.

“Can I help?” Moonpaw asked.

“I want you to stay here and keep an eye on Brambleclaw,” Jayfeather told her. “If I need more herbs, I’ll send someone to ask

for them, and you'll know enough to give them the right ones. If Alderheart gets back before I do, tell him where I am."

"Yes, Jayfeather." Moonpaw watched him hurry off, his thin gray tail disappearing through the screen of brambles covering the den entrance. A soft sound came from the nest at the back of the den, and she hurried over to check on Brambleclaw.

The former leader was shifting restlessly in his nest, his fur rumpled. His eyes were closed, but Moonpaw could see them moving beneath their lids. He muttered something she couldn't understand in a low, unhappy murmur.

"Brambleclaw?" she asked, but he didn't respond. He seemed fully asleep, despite his restlessness. As she stood beside him, he twisted in his nest and made a pained noise. Hesitantly, Moonpaw laid a paw on his shoulder. "It's all right," she whispered softly. "I'm here."

He seemed to settle, growing still. Maybe her presence was helping? When he had lain still for a few breaths, she lifted her paw from his side, planning to move away, but he twitched and gave a low whine.

"Okay, you're okay," she meowed, returning her paw to his back. Brambleclaw settled down again, and, after a few heartbeats, his breathing deepened.

Moonpaw felt like she was protecting him. *If I keep my paw on his back, he'll sleep better. Maybe then he'll feel better, too. Sleep is important for healing.* Without shifting her paw, she lay down on the sandy floor beside his nest.

Listening to Brambleclaw's slow, heavy breathing made her own eyelids feel heavy. Her mind drifted. *I'll just lie here for a few minutes, until I'm sure he won't wake. . . .*

The next time she blinked, she was padding down the slope toward the lake, Silverpelt glittering above her and an almost-full moon sailing overhead. *When did it get dark?* Hadn't it been shortly past sunhigh just a little while ago?

It was warmer than it should be, too, she realized, not like late leaf-fall at all. Fireflies flashed here and there and the grass beneath her paws had its greenleaf plushness. She could hear the gentle lapping of the lake against its banks. StarClan shone brightly enough

to illuminate her path. Moonpaw breathed in deeply, smelling the warm, green smell of growing plants.

It was utterly peaceful for a few heartbeats, but then, with a jolt, she realized she wasn't alone. Behind her, careless paw steps hurried, snapping twigs and rustling through bracken as they ran.

Moonpaw whipped around. "Oh," she meowed, her heart sinking. "It's you."

The orange cat was only a tail-length away, glaring at her. "You've been avoiding me," she growled accusingly.

For a breath, Moonpaw thought about denying it, but there was no point in that, was there? She *had* been avoiding the orange cat, refusing to hear her or think about her, trying hard not to dream about her.

"Of course I have," she meowed. "All you do is get me into trouble. And I've been so tired and so worried about what you might make me do. I needed to *sleep*."

The orange cat slashed her tail back and forth. "Don't be so mouse-hearted," she meowed. "I've never hurt you, have I?" She stepped closer. "Anyway, why should you sleep? I never need to sleep. Or eat, or anything like that. You should be like me." She tilted her head curiously. "Wouldn't you like that, Moonpaw?"

As she moved closer again, Moonpaw stepped back. Something cold slithered through her belly, and she shivered. *I don't want to be like her.* "Leave me alone."

The orange cat took another step toward her. Suddenly, a shadow fell over them both, blocking the starlight. Moonpaw looked up and saw another cat watching them intently. She let out a breath in sudden relief as she recognized him.

It was Brambleclaw! But not the Brambleclaw she knew. A younger version, broad-shouldered and strong. His coat was glossy with health and his amber eyes glowed. Moonpaw could see now what he must have been like as ThunderClan's leader, and, before that, as the young warrior who had helped to lead the four Clans to the lake.

He was glaring at the orange cat. "You don't belong here," he hissed, the fur rising along his back.

The orange cat stiffened. “I have every right to be here,” she objected, bristling. “And no cat can make me leave.”

Brambleclaw arched his back, seeming to grow larger before Moonpaw’s eyes, and unsheathed his claws. “Are you sure of that?” He stalked forward, his tail whipping the air. The orange cat backed away a few steps. She stopped there for a heartbeat, glaring defiantly, but, as Brambleclaw got closer, she backed away a little more, then turned and dashed into the night. Mid-stride, she faded, her bright pelt growing faint until she was just a blur of pale orange. Then she vanished completely, leaving only darkness behind.

Moonpaw gasped, and, at the sound of her own gasp, opened her eyes.

Bright sunlight shone all around her. Blinking, Moonpaw realized that she was still in the medicine den, on the ground beside Brambleclaw’s nest.

It was just a dream. Moonpaw swallowed hard. Even though she *knew* it had just been a dream—and she hadn’t even sleepwalked!—a cold sense of dread lingered under her fur. The orange cat’s voice, saying *you should be like me*, lingered in her mind. Trying to dispel it, she concentrated on keeping her breathing even and on the feel of the sandy floor of the medicine den under her, of Brambleclaw’s warm back beneath her paw.

He stirred, and she quickly drew back and rose, peering at his face. The dark brown tabby slowly opened his eyes and yawned, then winced. “Oh, hi, Moonpaw,” he meowed.

“How are you feeling?” Moonpaw asked. “You look like maybe something hurts?”

“A bit of a headache,” Brambleclaw confessed, “and my paw’s still sore. But I’m all right, really.”

“I’ll get you some feverfew,” Moonpaw meowed, heading for the medicine stores. While she pulled a few sprigs of the herb out of their crevice, she commented, “Fernstripe’s kitting. That’s where Jayfeather went.”

“Wonderful,” Brambleclaw meowed. “Kits are a Clan’s future.” He accepted the feverfew from her and, as he chewed it, a new light

came into his eyes. “I just remembered, I had the weirdest dream,” he told her. “You were in it.”

Shock ran through Moonpaw, the fur on her back rising. *Then that really was Brambleclaw in my dream.* How could she and Brambleclaw be sharing dreams again? “W-was the orange cat in it?” she asked, hoping that she hadn’t been, and that her appearance in Brambleclaw’s dream was just a coincidence.

“I think she was,” Brambleclaw meowed. He rested his chin on the edge of his nest. He already looked tired again, Moonpaw saw with a pang of worry. “I remember who she is now. And I know why she’s tied to you.”

Moonpaw’s heart began to beat harder. She’d never really doubted Bayshine and Thriftear’s assertion that the orange cat was her lost littermate, but Brambleclaw recognizing her made it feel more real. “You do?”

“Her name was Morningkit.” Brambleclaw’s eyes were worried and kind. “I’m sorry for her, Moonpaw, I am, but I think you should stay away from her. Not all kin mean well, not even littermates.”

Morningkit. No cat had ever said the orange cat’s name in Moonpaw’s hearing before, not even their parents.

Moonkit and Morningkit. Is that what our parents named us? Night and day, but only night survived.

The idea made her feel sick and guilty, as if it was somehow her fault Morningkit had died. As if Moonpaw had stolen something from her sister. *But I didn’t do anything wrong!*

As her heart began to calm, though, Moonpaw realized something. Brambleclaw mentioning the orange cat—*Morningkit*—meant that he really had been in her dream, didn’t it? And, in it, he had protected her.

“I’m not as worried about her as I was,” she told Brambleclaw. “Not now that I know you can make her leave me alone. I’ll be fine. Thank you for helping me.”

Brambleclaw’s gaze grew heavier, sadder. “I won’t be here forever,” he meowed. “You need to figure out how to take care of

yourself."

"I just—" Moonpaw paused. Brambleclaw wasn't dying, was he? *No, he just means none of us will be here forever. But he'll be here for a while.*

Brambleclaw knew that the orange cat was in Moonpaw's dreams, and he didn't think that Moonpaw was crazy, or bad. She could tell him everything, and maybe he could help her. She knew he *wanted* to help her. It was a relief, and she felt lighter suddenly, as if she'd been wading through knee-deep mud and now had stepped back onto solid ground.

She took a deep breath and began again. "I understand what you're saying," she meowed, "but I don't know how I can stay away from her. I'm not *asking* her to come to me. I tried ignoring her, and just concentrating on my training and duties." She took another breath, feeling vaguely panicky again at the memories. "When she came into my dreams, I tried not to sleep. But whenever I think maybe she's gone, she comes back. How can I get rid of her?"

Brambleclaw seemed to think for a while. Moonpaw could see that he was getting sleepy again, his eyes a little glazed. "She's attached to you," he meowed at last. "I don't know how she's done it, but maybe she's clinging to your life. To a life you're living, but that she never got to have. Maybe that's why she's getting older just like you are. A ghost would stay the age they were when they died, I think. Cats don't get older in StarClan."

Moonpaw nodded. That made sense. Morningkit had been so angry when Moonpaw wouldn't play with her, so angry to be alone. She remembered her littermate wailing, *It's not fair.* Moonpaw had gotten to grow up for real, and maybe Morningkit was imitating her somehow. "But what can I do about it?"

Brambleclaw's eyelids were drooping. "I remember how sad your parents were that she died. The whole Clan was sorry. If you can help her see how much she was loved here, even though her life was short, maybe it'll help her move on to StarClan. She could be with other cats there, all her Clanmates who have died. She wouldn't have to be alone. She could have more of a life there than she can here."

Moonpaw thought about it. Morningkit wanted someone to play with, someone who would pay attention to her. Moonpaw had been her playmate when they had been kits, but she couldn't be that now. Maybe Moonpaw could get Morningkit to realize that StarClan was where she could have what she wanted. "Do you think that'll be enough for her?" she asked. "If she knows cats here loved her, then she'll be ready to go on to StarClan?"

Brambleclaw didn't answer. His eyes were closed, and he had already drifted back into his feverish sleep, his breath shallow. At least this time he seemed more peaceful, not haunted by bad dreams.

Moonpaw's mind was spinning. If Brambleclaw and her parents were right and the orange cat truly was Morningkit, her littermate, then she needed to talk to her parents. All Bayshine and Thriftear had told her about her littermate was that Morningkit had been born alive but hadn't survived. And that they had loved her.

Maybe if Moonpaw could find out more about Morningkit's short life, and how she died, she could tell Morningkit about it. Maybe knowing about her own life, and that she hadn't missed everything, would help Morningkit let go of Moonpaw. She could stop clinging on to her littermate's life and be ready to join StarClan at last.

Moonpaw took a deep breath. *It's worth a try, right?*

Chapter 19

"It was a good idea to hunt over by the old Thunderpath, Tawnypelt," Finchlight meowed pleasantly as the cats padded through a stand of birch trees on ThunderClan's territory. "I can't believe how many mice we caught."

"Rolling in wild onion to mask our scents was smart, too," Spotfur chimed in. A dry brown leaf drifted from one of the trees, landing on her gray-and-white coat, and she shook it off with a twitch of her pelt. "Those mice never knew we were coming."

Stopping by the bush where they had buried the first few mice they caught, Tawnypelt dropped the ones she was already carrying. "The grass at the edge of a Thunderpath is a good place to hunt in leaf-bare," she told the other cats. "All the grass has gone to seed, and the mice gather there to eat it."

She scraped back the thin layer of earth above the buried mice, and Spotfur and Finchlight each picked up a few. As the three cats headed back toward ThunderClan camp, Tawnypelt held her head high, feeling warmed by the younger cats' praise.

She was glad that Squirrelstar had finally given her permission to hunt with the ThunderClan patrols. She liked to feel useful to the Clan that was being so hospitable. Hunting with these two cats had been a pleasure. It wasn't just that she liked both she-cats. More than that, she enjoyed how they respected her suggestions. She was

glad to advise them on their hunting techniques, and they seemed pleased to listen.

She couldn't help comparing this hunt to the frog hunt in ShadowClan a couple of moons before, when Bloompetal and Spireclaw had ignored her instructions and left her and Whorlpelt waiting in the cold instead of driving the frogs toward them. Bloompetal and Spireclaw weren't bad cats, or bad Clanmates, but they hadn't listened to her the way the ThunderClan cats had.

Did ThunderClan have more respect for their senior warriors than ShadowClan? Perhaps ShadowClan could learn a thing or two from the other Clan.

Or maybe it's just that I'm a guest, she thought wryly. Cats were cats, after all.

Glancing up at the sun, which was well past sunhigh and beginning to sink toward the earth, she couldn't help feeling a tremor of unease in the midst of her pleasure at the hunt. Tigerstar was definitely aware by now that Tawnypelt had decided to stay with ThunderClan, well past the time by which he'd told her to return or risk being unwelcome in ShadowClan.

He didn't really mean it, she told herself. Tigerstar would never permanently ban a member of his family from his Clan.

She paused before she took the next step, and Spotfur grunted inquiringly around the mice she carried. With a quick shake of her pelt, as if she were shaking away her worries, Tawnypelt started padding along again.

She'd realized that, while she didn't believe Tigerstar would follow through on his threat and ban her from ShadowClan, his pride might mean that it would take some time before she could go back. The idea of being kept out made her pelt prickle uncomfortably. *ShadowClan is my home.*

Still, Tawnypelt was pretty confident that Squirrelstar would be happy to let her stay in ThunderClan for as long as she liked, especially since Brambleclaw was sick and wanted Tawnypelt near. She didn't need to worry about Tigerstar's reaction; her son could wait for *her* to choose to return. She held her head higher as she led her triumphant hunting party back into ThunderClan's camp.

As they emerged from the thorn tunnel into camp and headed for the fresh-kill pile, there were a few admiring comments.

"Good catch!" Sparkpelt meowed encouragingly, and beside her, her son, Nightheart, yowled in agreement.

"Great timing; I was just thinking I'd love a fat mouse right now," Birchfall commented.

"I'll take one into the nursery for Fernstripe," Myrtlebloom meowed. "She needs to keep up her strength."

Tawnypelt dropped her mice onto the prey pile. "How are she and her kits?" The queen had labored through most of the previous day.

Myrtlebloom looked pleased. "All three kits are strong and healthy. Two she-kits, Shykit and Puffkit, and a little tom, Leapkit. Fernstripe is tired but recovering well, and Shellfur is happy. I've left my own kits with the elders so she can get some rest."

"And we're having fun with them, so take your time," Cloudtail meowed from near the elders' den. He appeared to be giving badger rides, to the kits' delight: Sunkit clung to his shoulders while Oakkit and Hazelkit were trying to leap onto his back.

"It's *my* turn!" Hazelkit yowled.

"Just *try* to get me off," Sunkit hissed down at her.

"Be good for Cloudtail," Myrtlebloom meowed absently, picking up a mouse and turning back toward the nursery.

Tawnypelt purred with laughter. "Give Fernstripe my congratulations," she meowed. She didn't know the ThunderClan queen well enough to be invited into the nursery for a peek at the new kits, but perhaps she'd still be here in half a moon or so when they came out into camp for the first time, taking unsteady steps and looking around, wide-eyed, at their home.

"Tawnypelt." At Squirrelstar's meow, Tawnypelt turned to find the ThunderClan leader standing close behind her.

"Hello," she meowed, noticing that Squirrelstar looked troubled. "Is everything okay?" *I haven't been gone that long. Surely Brambleclaw hasn't gotten worse?* Her belly clenched with worry.

Squirrelstar gestured with a wave of her tail for Tawnypelt to follow, leading her to the edge of camp, away from the other cats.

"Nothing's wrong," she meowed in response to Tawnypelt's worried look. "But I wanted to get your opinion on how Brambleclaw is doing. You've been spending so much time with him, I thought you might have some idea on how his recovery is going."

Tawnypelt sighed and sat down, letting her side brush gently against Squirrelstar's. "He still seems very sick to me," she confessed. "What do your medicine cats say?"

Maybe Jayfeather or Alderheart knew something that Tawnypelt didn't.

"They just say 'wait and see' or 'it's too soon to tell,'" Squirrelstar complained. "I know you won't treat me like a kit who can't be worried. You understand how it is to have a sick mate. I'm concerned about whether Brambleclaw will be ready to go with the Clan if we do end up having to leave in two moons."

Tawnypelt felt like she owed it to her old friend to be honest. "I can't say what things will be like in two moons, but Brambleclaw couldn't travel now if the Clan moved." She hesitated, wondering if she should say more, then decided she had to. "And I've heard some of your elders say that if ThunderClan left to find another home, they would stay behind."

Squirrelstar's green eyes widened with horror. *"Never!"* Several of her Clanmates looked over at her exclamation, and Squirrelstar lowered her voice. "I would never leave any of our elders behind. Especially not now that Brambleclaw is among them. They can't stay here without our Clan. Who would look after them?"

Tawnypelt's heart ached at the crushed expression on Squirrelstar's face. "I hope it won't come to that."

She wished that she could reassure the ThunderClan leader that everything would be all right, and that it wouldn't come down to making a choice between staying without a way to contact StarClan or leaving some cats behind, but she couldn't. She was no medicine cat, and the future was as much of a mystery to her as whatever was going on behind the blue walls around the Moonpool.

You must not lose your way on the journey, even after the stars have faded away, she remembered Bluestar saying in her vision. But

had Bluestar meant an actual journey? Were the Clans fated to leave the lake? There was no way for Tawnypelt to tell.

"There must be another way," Squirrelstar meowed softly. "I'm not leaving any cat behind. Especially not Brambleclaw." There was pain in her eyes, and Tawnypelt, for the first time, wondered how hard it had been for Squirrelstar to take over as leader of ThunderClan, when becoming leader meant that her mate was giving up.

Usually when a deputy became leader, it was because the leader had died. The deputy mourned the cat they had admired, but moved on, taking over responsibility for their Clan. But Squirrelstar had watched a cat who was not only her leader, but her mate, walk away from leadership because it had become too much for him after all he had suffered in the Dark Forest. Tawnypelt knew how that felt: She had watched Rowanclaw step down and knew what a difficult decision it had been. Now Squirrelstar had to lead their Clan with Brambleclaw still among them. He was ill and in pain, and she still had to stand by and watch, with all the pressure of leadership upon her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Squirrelstar sympathetically. "It must be difficult to lead the Clan when your mate is so ill."

Squirrelstar shook her head, her face clouding. "I don't know what I feel," she meowed. "When I spend time with Brambleclaw, he's usually himself. Feverish, but so loving and so concerned about the Clan and what's happening to every cat in it. But sometimes . . . he seems so far away. I worry he might be preparing his own den in StarClan. I can't imagine—" Her voice broke, but she took a deep breath and went on. "You know that I've loved Brambleclaw since I was an apprentice. All my life, really."

Tawnypelt nodded. She still clearly remembered the stubborn young apprentice who had insisted on joining their quest, and how she had made a space in Brambleclaw's heart for herself.

Squirrelstar looked agonized. "I can't imagine life without Brambleclaw, or ThunderClan without him. If he dies, part of me would die, too." She glanced shyly at Tawnypelt. "I wouldn't say this to every cat, but I know you understand. It's been a long time since

Rowanclaw died, and I know you've never felt the same way for another tom."

Haven't I? The warmth she felt when she was with Crowfeather flooded through Tawnypelt's mind. It wasn't quite the same as the way she felt at Rowanclaw's memory—she and Rowanclaw had built their lives together, raised kits, and run a Clan together, so there were layers upon layers of love there—but there was *something* between her and Crowfeather, and it felt familiar. She avoided Squirrelstar's gaze.

"Hang on." Squirrelstar stared at her, then sat down abruptly, as if her legs had given out under her. "Is there something I never knew about? *Was* there another tom?"

Hot with embarrassment, Tawnypelt licked at her ruff. Squirrelstar continued to look at her eagerly and Tawnypelt relented: At least the revelation had taken that terrible look from Squirrelstar's face.

"There wasn't another tom," she meowed. "Except now . . . maybe there is one? I'm not sure. I should put it out of my mind, though. It can't go anywhere." She fluffed her tail, feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

"Why can't it go anywhere?" Squirrelstar asked. "No cat would judge you for finding love again. Unless"—her eyes stretched wider than ever—"he's not already mated, is he?"

"No!" Tawnypelt yowled. From in front of the nursery, Myrtlebloom and Daisy raised their heads to stare at her and she quickly lowered her voice. "He's in another Clan, that's all."

"Oh." Squirrelstar blinked in surprised relief. "Well, that's not against the code anymore. And there's nothing wrong with it, I suppose. I guess I just think of switching Clans for love as something really young warriors do, not senior warriors like us who have lived with our Clans for seasons and seasons."

"I wouldn't switch Clans," Tawnypelt meowed firmly. "That's why I'm just trying to put him out of my mind." She twitched her tail restlessly. She knew her loyalty to ShadowClan should come before everything, and she couldn't imagine Crowfeather, who was WindClan's deputy, would ever consider leaving his Clan either. But

the idea of just forgetting about the possibility of loving Crowfeather didn't feel right somehow.

Squirrelstar's gaze softened. "If the feelings you have for this tom are real, you shouldn't deny yourself happiness. Life can be so short, and things change fast. . . . I regret the times when Brambleclaw and I were apart."

There was sadness in her voice again, and Tawnypelt's ears twitched with sympathy. "I'll think about it," she promised.

"Good," meowed Squirrelstar. She gazed at Tawnypelt thoughtfully for a few breaths, then leaned forward, her eyes twinkling. "Is it Brackenfur?" she guessed.

"Brackenfur!" Tawnypelt meowed, barely remembering to keep her voice down in her surprise. "Why would you think that?"

Squirrelstar flicked one ear. "Nothing wrong with Brackenfur!" she meowed cheerfully, her orange tail twitching. "I've seen you two talking when he goes to visit Brambleclaw, and I thought Brambleclaw might not be the only reason he was visiting the medicine den. I'd hate to lose him, but maybe he'd want to come to ShadowClan . . . for the right she-cat." She nudged Tawnypelt playfully.

With a *mrrow* of laughter, Tawnypelt shook her head. "It really isn't Brackenfur, so you can go ahead and stop planning my future with him."

"There are a lot of attractive toms in SkyClan . . . ," Squirrelstar mused, and Tawnypelt laughed again, feeling lighter than she had since their conversation began. At least Squirrelstar, diverted by gossip, no longer had that terrible broken look on her face.

"I'm not going to tell you," she meowed, "but I will keep your advice in mind." Getting to her paws, she added, "I'm going to see if Brambleclaw is awake. Do you want to come?"

Squirrelstar rose, too, and fluffed out her pelt. "No, I'm going to check in with the border patrol that just came back. I'll go see Brambleclaw closer to sundown. This time of day, there are usually other cats visiting him, and little Moonpaw is always hanging around if her mentor doesn't have her working on a task. She was even

sleeping in the medicine den for a while, but Jayfeather sent her back to the apprentices' den."

Tawnypelt's paws prickled with apprehension, and she slid her claws out, then in again. *I'm not going to say anything bad about an apprentice, not without a good reason.* But she was still uncomfortable with the idea of the odd little cat lingering near her sick brother. "Why does she spend so much time in the medicine den if she isn't a medicine-cat apprentice?"

Squirrelstar shrugged. "Well, she almost was a medicine-cat apprentice. You know how her face is divided?" She twitched her whiskers, one side and then the other. "We wondered if her appearance might be a sign from StarClan that she should be a medicine cat. She helped out for a while, but she didn't feel the call. But I guess she got used to being there. Jayfeather says she's useful, which means a lot coming from him."

Tawnypelt didn't comment, just meowed a goodbye and headed for the medicine den. It wasn't her business to criticize how Squirrelstar ran ThunderClan, or how the ThunderClan medicine cats ran their den.

But she couldn't help hoping that Moonpaw was off training with her mentor right now rather than hanging around the medicine den with Brambleclaw. As she approached the shallow cave that housed ThunderClan's medicine den, she tried to shake off the thought: *With Moonpaw, Squirrelstar might be missing a problem right under her muzzle.*

Chapter 20

Soon after the sun rose, Starlingpaw and the rest of the patrol from the Clans left the Tribe's cave. A group of Tribe cats came with them, planning to escort them halfway down the mountain before parting ways for good. Surrounded by the sound of cats chatting companionably despite the cold breeze that blew through their pelts, Starlingpaw was almost sorry to go, even though he would be glad to get back to SkyClan.

He looked carefully at the gray slopes of rock, the thin grass and brambles growing up through the cracks, the moss in the shade, the intensely blue sky, and the birds soaring far overhead, committing everything to memory. There was something so *big* about the Tribe's territory—the thundering waterfall, the towering peaks—something that took his breath away.

I'll come back here someday, he promised himself.

His traveling companions were more cheerful than they had been on their way up the mountain. Starlingpaw supposed it was because Feathertail had promised that StarClan was still watching over them, even without the Moonpool, and now the situation seemed much less desperate.

Knowing that they hadn't been abandoned by their ancestors, the Clan cats' paws were lighter as they journeyed down the mountain than they had been on the way up. Ivypool and Duskfur were talking

with Stormfur, who had questions about the cats he remembered from RiverClan and ThunderClan. "It's wonderful to hear that Mosspelt lives," he told Duskfur. "She was like a mother to me and Feathertail. Please tell her that Brook and I are still happy in the Tribe. She worried that we'd regret our choice."

A moment later, he turned to Ivypool, discussing whether Graystripe's ThunderClan kits, Blossomfall and Bumblestripe, would really want him to visit. "Perhaps it would be strange for them, since I'm so much older and had a different mother," he meowed wistfully, and Ivypool shook her head.

"I think they'd be happy to meet you," she meowed. "Blossomfall's got full-grown kits of her own, so you've got quite a lot of kin in ThunderClan. You'll always be welcome there, you know. Squirrelstar would be so pleased if you visited."

Starlingpaw wondered if the sturdy gray tom would actually journey all the way to the Clans' territory. Maybe he would bring some Tribe cats with him!

"If you ever come visit SkyClan, I could show you how we hunt," he offered to Rain. The to-be looked at him with eager surprise.

"I would love to see the lake someday," he meowed. "It is hard for me to imagine so much still water—too much for a cat to swim across, Stormfur says. And all the flat land and grass and trees!"

Next to them, Shadowsight was arguing politely with a prey-hunter who remembered him from his previous visit. "It really is Shadow*sight* now. Shadow*kit* was only when I was a kit."

The prey-hunter shook her head, puzzled. "It's so strange to me how Clan cats change their names all through their lives. Doesn't it get confusing?"

Nectarsong, Hootwhisker, and Fidgetflake were all also talking amiably with the Tribe cats as they made their way down the mountainside. Every cat seemed friendly and relaxed, enjoying the sunshine and the company.

Every cat except Crowfeather, Starlingpaw realized. The WindClan deputy was silent, pacing steadily along, his eyes flicking between the other cats. Was he not happy to have made contact with

Feathertail? His lost love, if Tree was correct. *Maybe it made him sad,* Starlingpaw thought. She'd died, and he'd gone on without her.

Crowfeather didn't exactly look *sad*, though. He looked thoughtful, and perhaps a bit anxious. Starlingpaw thought of the deputy's solemn gaze as he stared out of the cave the night before. *Something's definitely on Crowfeather's mind.* His eyes passed over each cat in the patrol as if he wanted to peel back their pelts and look beneath.

Stormfur halted at last. "This is where we leave you," he yowled to the Clan cats. "I wish you a safe journey and hope that we will see each other again."

The Tribe and Clan cats began to exchange final farewells.

"Thanks for sharing food with me," Starlingpaw meowed to Rain. "It was fun meeting you. I hope you do come to the lake someday." *I hope we're still there when you come.*

"I hope I do, too," Rain answered. "It has been very good to meet you."

A tail brushed Starlingpaw's shoulder and he turned to see Feather gesturing for him to come closer. The gray tom bent to speak softly into his ear, so that no other cat could overhear. "Remember what I told you, Starlingpaw," he meowed. "Let your suspicions go, and focus on being the best warrior you can for your Clan. It's the most honorable way, and I think you will be much happier."

"Okay. Thank you." Starlingpaw nodded, feeling a little embarrassed. Feather was right, he knew. The best thing Starlingpaw could do for now would be to focus on becoming a strong warrior for SkyClan. If he had a special purpose other than that, surely it would become clear soon. He twitched his ears and looked around, narrowing his eyes. *But I should stay alert, at least, just in case.*

As the patrol of Clan cats started down the mountainside again, waving their tails to the Tribe cats in farewell, he saw Crowfeather eyeing his companions once more. His intense gaze ran over them, one by one. What was he thinking? Starlingpaw wondered. *What*

else did Feathertail tell him? He was sure, suddenly, that Crowfeather knew more than he had shared with the rest of the patrol.

They padded on, scrambling over boulders and weaving their way along a narrow rock path. Starlingpaw caught himself glancing frequently back over his shoulder at Crowfeather, who had taken guard position at the end of the line of cats. Who was the WindClan deputy looking at now? *Is it Fidgetflake?* He winced at the thought, remembering how Feather had scolded him. *Feather doesn't really understand, though,* he told himself. *Tribe cats are different.*

Once when he looked back, his gaze caught Crowfeather's and they stared at each other for a moment, the WindClan deputy's face unreadable and stern. Starlingpaw whipped back to face front, his heart pounding with embarrassment. *I don't want him to think I'm nosy!* The WindClan deputy was intimidating enough without giving him a reason to criticize Starlingpaw.

At the next place where the path down the mountain widened, Nectarsong dropped back to walk beside Starlingpaw. "So," she meowed. "Tell me what you learned from hunting with the Tribe cats."

Starlingpaw groaned silently. *Do I really have to learn right now?* Nectarsong took being a mentor very seriously, which was nice, of course, but she was *always* trying to teach him something. "Um, their trick with the shiny rock was smart," he meowed. "They figured out how to bring their prey to them instead of having to run after it themselves. Do you think we could do something like that with the crows in SkyClan?"

Nectarsong shrugged. "Crows aren't usually the best prey," she commented. "They're fiercer than most birds, and not as tasty as sparrows or doves. We have easier hunting on our territory than the Tribe does. But the more tricks you know, the better. You never know when they might be useful. We should try it out when we get back. Maybe we'll catch something juicier than a jackdaw."

"**O**kay," Starlingpaw meowed. The path was narrowing, and, as soon as Nectarsong dropped back to walk behind him, Starlingpaw looked over his shoulder again to see what Crowfeather was doing.

Was the WindClan deputy watching Fidgetflake? It was hard to tell. . . .

Despite Feather's advice, Starlingpaw couldn't help still wondering whether Fidgetflake might be the two-faced cat. Maybe being a good apprentice was the best thing he could do, but it seemed to him that that was only true if Tawnypelt *hadn't* been talking to him, and if he *wasn't* special.

But what if she had been, and he was? Then he owed it to StarClan to take their words seriously and do everything he could for them. They could be counting on his help. Starlingpaw swished his tail back and forth, thinking, and his mind went back and forth, considering the possibilities.

The smooth stone of the path beneath their paws turned to loose rocks and dirt as they walked, getting farther down the mountain's slope. Thinking hard, Starlingpaw forgot to watch his step. Suddenly, he felt a rock slip under one of his forepaws. With a yowl of alarm, he slid, scrambling, several tail-lengths down the mountain, pebbles and dirt scattering beneath him. He clawed at the ground, trying to stop, his heart pounding.

Something wrapped around one ankle and jerked him to a halt, and a sharp pain shot through his leg. Flying dirt hit his face, blinding him for a few heartbeats and filling his mouth with the taste of mud. Starlingpaw yowled again, frightened and hurt, and the other cats raced downhill to surround him.

"Starlingpaw! Are you all right?" Nectarsong meowed.

Starlingpaw whimpered. He felt shaken and sore all over, and his leg hurt terribly. He dropped to the ground, trying to catch his breath. A heartbeat later, Fidgetflake and Shadowsight were crouched on either side of him, feeling him over with gentle, practiced paws. He let out another frightened whine.

"You'll be all right, Starlingpaw," Fidgetflake meowed reassuringly, one paw on his aching leg. "A tree root caught around your ankle

and stopped you from sliding any further. Nothing's broken. Can you move your paw for me?"

Starlingpaw flexed his paw carefully, back and forth. "It hurts," he whispered. Glancing down, he saw a thick, wet stripe of red. "It's bleeding!" he yowled, alarmed.

"We can fix that," Fidgetflake told him. "Back off and give us some room, please," he meowed, glancing up at the circle of cats around them. "He's okay, just shaken up."

The rest of the patrol moved away a few tail-lengths, leaving Starlingpaw with Fidgetflake and Shadowsight. "It hurts," he told them again, his voice quavering. He wanted to be brave, but he was scared. "How are we going to get home if I can't walk?"

He expected them to exchange worried glances, but Fidgetflake answered calmly, "You'll be back on your paws before you know it. I'm sure it does hurt, but trust me, you're in no danger." To Shadowsight, he added, "Can you scout around and see what herbs you can find for pain and to prevent infection? I'll get Starlingpaw's wound clean."

Shadowsight nodded. "There might be some elder bushes growing around here. I'll take one of the warriors with me and they can gather cobwebs for the wound."

"Take Nectarsong," Fidgetflake advised. "Since Starlingpaw's her apprentice, I'm sure she's anxious to help."

Shadowsight moved away and Fidgetflake patted Starlingpaw's side with a gentle paw. "Close your eyes and try to relax," he advised. "I'm going to clean your wound and then get you all patched up."

As Fidgetflake bent his head toward Starlingpaw's leg, Starlingpaw squeezed his eyes shut. The first touch to his wound stung, and he breathed in sharply, resisting the urge to pull away. After a few strained breaths, the rhythmic movements of Fidgetflake's cleaning seemed to dull some of the pain.

Time passed, and Starlingpaw almost dozed, feeling secure in the knowledge that Fidgetflake was taking care of him, just as he and

Frecklewish had done ever since Starlingpaw was a tiny kit. *I'll be okay.*

"I found elder bushes farther down the slope, and even some comfrey growing between those boulders over there," Shadowsight announced, and Starlingpaw opened his eyes to see the ShadowClan medicine cat return, followed by Nectarsong carrying a wad of cobwebs.

"Good," Fidgetflake meowed, rising. "Feeling better, Starlingpaw?"

Starlingpaw moved his leg, first gingerly and then with more confidence. "It feels a lot better," he meowed. "It's still sore, though."

"The poultice I'm going to make for you will help," Fidgetflake assured him, "and I see some dandelions over there. You can eat their leaves for the pain."

The dandelions were growing from a crevice between the rocks. Fidgetflake plucked a few and placed them before Starlingpaw before sitting and beginning to chew the elder leaves and comfrey.

Starlingpaw took a reluctant bite of dandelion leaves and grimaced. They were just as bitter as he remembered from when he'd been given them to help ease bumps and bruises as a kit. But he knew they would help.

He'd choked them down by the time Fidgetflake had chewed the herbs into a thick green paste. "There you go," he meowed, spreading the paste over the cut on Starlingpaw's leg, then covering it with cobwebs to help keep the poultice in place. "How does it feel now?"

Starlingpaw wiggled his leg and flexed his paw back and forth. It ached, but the real pain was gone. "Better," he reported.

"Can he walk?" asked Crowfeather, coming closer. "It would be good to get off the mountain today, but if Starlingpaw needs to rest his leg, we'll make do."

"I can walk," Starlingpaw meowed, getting slowly to his paws. When he put his weight on his hurt foot, it ached, but not as badly as he'd expected. "I might have to go slow, though."

Fidgetflake eyed him carefully. "Take a few steps," he ordered, and watched as Starlingpaw paced back and forth. "You're limping a

little. Lean on me whenever you can, so you don't have to put too much weight on your paw, okay?"

"Okay." As they began to clamber downhill once more, Starlingpaw leaned against Fidgetflake's sturdy side. He felt warm and safe, protected.

I'm a mouse-brain. At the realization, a hot flush ran beneath his fur. Why had he ever thought that Fidgetflake might secretly be a villain? What had the medicine cat ever done other than look after his Clanmates? Starlingpaw had a whole lifetime of experience of Fidgetflake being dedicated to helping the cats of SkyClan. There was nothing two-faced about him.

There was one thing that still bothered Starlingpaw, though: Fidgetflake had given Leafstar the wrong medicine, hadn't he? Chickweed instead of the chamomile that helped her sleep.

"**F**idgetflake?" he asked quietly. "What is chickweed for?"

The medicine cat looked down at him, surprised. "We use it to treat greencough if we don't have catmint," he answered. "It's not quite as good. Why?"

"Would it hurt me if I ate it?" Starlingpaw went on. *I don't believe that Fidgetflake would try to hurt Leafstar. Not really.*

"**I**t doesn't taste wonderful, but it wouldn't do anything bad to you," Fidgetflake told him, adding firmly, "Don't try it, though. We can't waste medicine on curiosity, not with leaf-bare almost here."

"I won't," Starlingpaw promised. "I just heard it mentioned and I was curious what it was for."

I let my imagination run away with me like I was a kit, he admitted to himself, ashamed.

The cats plodded, and sometimes scrambled, down through the foothills of the mountain. Gradually, the sun sank toward the horizon, throwing shadows across their path. As time passed, Starlingpaw's leg began to ache again, then to throb with an insistent, dull pain.

"Crowfeather, I think Starlingpaw needs a rest," Fidgetflake meowed finally, bringing the patrol to a halt on a small plateau.

"I can keep going," Starlingpaw insisted. He'd been an idiot, and he wasn't going to hold every other cat back.

Crowfeather sighed. "No, let's make camp for the night. It'll be dark soon and I'd rather avoid any more accidents. And this is a good place to rest." Starlingpaw felt even guiltier for a moment, but it didn't really seem like Crowfeather was blaming him.

"I'm tired anyway," Duskfur meowed, giving Starlingpaw a reassuring look. "We'll get farther faster if we start fresh in the morning."

"Let's settle down by those trees," Ivypool suggested. "They'll block some of the wind, and there might be better hunting beneath them." Gnarled, twisted trees grew on one side of the plateau, clinging to the mountainside by their spindly roots.

Several of the cats went hunting, catching a few mice and voles, and Starlingpaw shared a mouse with Nectarsong as the sun set.

"**E**at another dandelion leaf before you go to sleep," Fidgetflake told him, appearing out of the darkness and dropping one in front of him. Starlingpaw hadn't even realized that he'd left the quiet circle of cats. "A good night's sleep will be the best medicine."

"Okay," Starlingpaw meowed. "Thanks, Fidgetflake." Dutifully, he took a bite of the dandelion leaf. It didn't taste any better than before, but he felt comforted that Fidgetflake was still looking out for him.

When they'd finished eating, the cats curled up side by side, close together for protection, except for Crowfeather, who'd volunteered to stand guard over them for the first part of the night. Starlingpaw rolled over in his spot between Nectarsong and Fidgetflake, careful of his hurt leg, so that he could see StarClan shining in the dark sky. Everything seemed less scary now that Crowfeather had confirmed their ancestors were still watching over them.

I should take Feather's advice, he told himself sternly. He'd been suspecting Fidgetflake based on nothing but the rantings of a cat

sick with fever. Maybe he'd thought that being special, saving his Clan, would make up for the fact that he'd accidentally gotten his own father killed. He ached all over at the thought and stared harder at the stars overhead.

Being special wouldn't change what had happened, he realized. Nothing would, except perhaps just being the best Clanmate he could, day after day, forever.

From now on, that's what I'll do, he promised silently. *I won't think about what Tawnypelt told me. I'll just keep my paws on the path that's ahead of me and work hard for SkyClan.*

He blinked up at the stars overhead, his vision blurry with tiredness, and they seemed to sparkle down at him. Maybe one of them was Kitescratch, still looking out for him.

Chapter 21

"**B**ayshine?" Moonpaw meowed hesitantly, poking her head through the thin branches that covered the entrance of the warriors' den. "Thriftear?"

She'd been waiting since she'd left the medicine den the previous day to get her parents alone. Yesterday, they'd been surrounded by other cats until sundown. And, while she'd been waiting, Moonpaw herself had gathered up her courage to talk to Goldenpaw. He'd assured her that he didn't blame her for his injury and shown her that he was already mostly healed.

"Too bad I won't have a cool scar," he'd meowed with a purr of laughter. "Next time, let's try harder."

J*ayfeather was right,* she'd realized, *Goldenpaw really is a pretty easygoing cat.*

Then he and Shinepaw had wanted to spend time with Moonpaw, and it didn't seem right to walk away when they'd just started being her friends again.

What do you need them *for, anyway?* the voice in her head had complained. *Why do you care what they think when you have* me*?*

And today, first Bayshine had been on a border patrol and then Thriftear had gone out hunting. Then Sunbeam had taken Moonpaw out for battle practice. When they were all finally back in camp,

Thriftear had gone off to the nursery to visit Fernstripe and her new kits, and Bayshine had shared prey and a good long gossip with Nightheart. Moonpaw had hung around the edges of camp, almost vibrating with impatience. She hadn't heard the orange cat's voice today, and she hoped she might be able to talk to her parents privately, without the other cat listening in.

At last, well past sunhigh, she'd seen her parents strolling unhurriedly toward the warriors' den and followed, sure that there wouldn't be any other warriors in there at this time of day. Now, as they looked up from their nest in surprise, she wasn't sure what to say.

"Moonpaw?" Bayshine asked, sitting up in the nest. "Everything okay? We were just having a nap." Beside him, Thriftear fixed Moonpaw with a worried amber gaze.

"Nothing's wrong," Moonpaw answered, padding the rest of the way into the den. "I just . . . I wanted to talk to you both about something." She shifted on her paws, feeling more and more awkward.

This is ridiculous! She tried to be firm with herself. *They're my parents—I should be able to talk to them, even about this.* But she didn't want to make them sad. And how could a conversation about their kit who'd died so young *not* make them sad?

Eyes wide with concern, Thriftear climbed out of the nest, shaking loose bracken from her fur. "Is something worrying you?" she asked, draping her tail comfortingly across Moonpaw's back. "Or has Jayfeather been giving you a hard time? If he said something harsh, you shouldn't take it personally. He's just a grump. I can talk to him if you'd like."

"Jayfeather's always been good to me," Moonpaw meowed, bewildered. "I don't know why other cats are scared of him. He can be strict, but he's actually really kind."

"Then what's going on?" Bayshine asked. He came and sat by Moonpaw, too, his side reassuringly warm and sturdy next to hers. "You can talk to us about anything that's bothering you, I promise."

Moonpaw took a deep breath. *This is it.* "Can you tell me about my sister?"

Both her parents froze for a heartbeat, their gazes as startled as if they'd been splashed with cold water from the lake.

"You've been dreaming about her again?" Thriftear asked hopefully. "You've been hearing her voice?" She and Bayshine both had hesitant, awed looks on their faces.

This is why I can't tell them the whole truth, Moonpaw thought. *They don't want to know how scary Morningkit can be. They just want to know that she's still around.* She swished her tail thoughtfully, trying to decide how much she should say.

"I had a dream about her the other night," she meowed cautiously, "and I realized that I don't know anything about what her life was like. I can't remember her at all. And I really want to."

She felt like she was deceiving her parents. Would Bayshine and Thriftear tell her what she wanted to learn, even if they knew she was hoping to use it to get rid of Morningkit?

Yes, she told herself firmly. *If they understood everything, they'd see that Morningkit going to StarClan is what's best for her, and for me.*

Thriftear blinked at her warmly and cuddled closer to Moonpaw. "I'm sorry we haven't told you about her before," she meowed. "We should have all along, but it was hard for us to talk about."

"It was such a sad time," Bayshine agreed. "But you deserve to know. It's part of your life, too."

Her parents curled up on either side of her, fur brushing fur. Between them, Moonpaw felt like a kit again, and very safe. Nothing could be too terrible, not with her parents on each side of her, protecting her.

"When I found out I was expecting kits," Thriftear began, "we were so excited. We were eager to start a family." Beside her, Bayshine nodded, his gaze soft at the memory. "But I had a really hard time physically. I felt sick all the time, and exhausted. Alderheart was worried that the kits I was carrying—you and your sister—weren't growing fast enough, didn't move enough. He and Jayfeather decided I should go into the nursery early and rest while most queens would still have been hunting for themselves."

"When you were finally born, after a long, hard labor, you were strong and healthy," Bayshine meowed, picking up the tale. "A perfect kit. But Morningkit—"

"Her name really was Morningkit?" Moonpaw interrupted, and her father nodded.

"We thought that was nice," Thriftear confirmed. "Morningkit and Moonkit. We never got to announce your names before she died, but the names went together, and fit each of you, too, with your sweet little face like a half-moon, and Morningkit as orange as the sun at dawn."

This was the first time her parents had said the name of their other kit, and she shivered a little, not quite sure whether to be relieved or frightened. If they hadn't told any cat her littermate's name, this meant that Brambleclaw really had walked in her dreams and that, for some reason, he was the only other cat who could see and talk to Morningkit. She hadn't imagined anything; it was all real.

What did it mean that Brambleclaw could see Morningkit too? Had StarClan given Brambleclaw a special gift for some reason? Maybe to help her?

Or, she thought, feeling suddenly sick with anxiety, maybe Brambleclaw could see Morningkit because he was close to joining the world of the dead himself. *No,* she told herself stubbornly, *he's not that ill.*

"What's the matter?" Bayshine asked. Both her parents were looking at her with concern. Moonpaw realized they could see how troubled she was.

"It's just that I don't remember Morningkit at all, and that makes me sad," she meowed, and realized it was true. It seemed terrible that her earliest memories didn't include her lost littermate—unfair to Morningkit, who should have been the cat closest to her.

Maybe she just wants me to know her. Maybe that's why she's here.

Her parents exchanged a thoughtful glance. "If you want, we can take you where she is," Thriftear meowed at last. "Maybe that would be a better place to continue this conversation."

"What do you mean?" Moonpaw asked, startled. *She's in my head, that's where she is. How would you take me there?*

"Come on." Bayshine got to his paws and pushed his way through the branches that covered the den entrance, his waving tail beckoning them on behind him. "You'll see."

He led the way through the thorn tunnel out of ThunderClan's camp and into the woods. There was a chill in the air, but the sky was a clear blue and there were still a few brown and yellow leaves on the trees above them. The sunny day and the brisk breeze made Moonpaw feel hopeful. Maybe the good weather was an omen that something good was going to happen.

At last, they came to a spot that Moonpaw was familiar with—it wasn't far from the grassy clearing where the mentors gave the apprentices battle training—but that she'd never paid much attention to. It was a pretty place, she thought. She could see that several different kinds of flowers would grow there in the spring. Even now that leaf-bare was so close, goldenrod was still blooming here and there, along with a few late primroses, and red and yellow leaves had fallen from the surrounding trees, adding bright touches of color to the ground.

"This is where Morningkit was buried," her mother told her softly, looking down at the grassy earth between two alder trees. "You know that the elders take the dead to lay them in the ground, and usually we don't know exactly where they are. But we asked Brightheart to show us. We weren't quite ready to let Morningkit go."

"The elders picked the prettiest, most peaceful spot they could find," Bayshine meowed. "After Brightheart showed us this place, we would come here to talk to her, once you were old enough that your mother could leave you for a little while. Sometimes we still do."

"It's a good spot to tell you about her now." Thriftear sat, tucking her paws beneath her. Moonpaw nestled beside her, and Bayshine joined them. "Morningkit was a beautiful little kit, with the softest orange fur. But she was so much smaller than you were when you both were born. And she just got weaker, even though Alderheart and Jayfeather did everything they could for her. She was a fierce little kit, though. I felt like she was fighting for life every time she

took a breath." Thriftear sighed. "I really thought she would live. I begged StarClan to help her if they could. But after a few days, she was too ill to nurse, and then she just slept most of the time."

There was a tremor in her voice, and Bayshine picked up the story, his own voice low but steady. "We were both in the nursery the day she died. The medicine cats had warned us that death was coming, that there was nothing they could do, and I wanted to be there, too. We both wanted her to be surrounded by love. Her breathing just got slower and slower, and then it stopped. We tried to breathe life back into her, but . . ." His voice died off, and he shook his head. After a few heartbeats he added sadly, "She died before she was even old enough for her eyes to open."

Moonpaw looked up into her father's face and saw that his eyes were the same shade of green as Morningkit's. She and Brambleclaw must be the only living cats who knew that.

If Morningkit goes to StarClan, someday Bayshine will see them for himself.

"We loved her so much, it almost killed us to lose her. We used to come here every day," Bayshine told her. "We'd clear the ground as well as we could, take away dead plants and twigs that were out of place. At first it was comforting, but after a while it felt like we were just strengthening our grief. We had to say goodbye."

The breeze picked up, and Moonpaw, shivering, curled closer to her mother. Would Morningkit speak to her here, where she was buried? But she didn't hear the voice.

Maybe she doesn't like to come here, Moonpaw thought. *She likes pretending she's alive.*

"Do you know why we were finally able to let go of some of that endless grief?" Thriftear asked gently, and Moonpaw shook her head.

"Why?"

"Because of you." Thriftear leaned forward and brushed her nose against Moonpaw's muzzle. Moonpaw breathed in her mother's familiar, comforting scent. "You were growing and alive, and you needed us. We loved you, and so, even though we loved Morningkit,

too, we were able to put aside our grief and concentrate on raising you."

"You've been our joy," meowed Bayshine, looking at her fondly. "But we should have brought you here before. Even if you don't remember Morningkit, you have the right to say goodbye to your littermate. You lost your kin that day, too."

Moonpaw nuzzled against her father, feeling an overwhelming wave of affection sweep through her. She felt a new tenderness for Morningkit, a fierce little kit who had fought to live, tenderness she hadn't felt for the sharp-tongued cat who haunted her dreams and spoke in her mind.

Moonpaw had never before thought of the littermate who haunted her as a helpless kit, one who had died far too soon. She looked down at the ground beneath her paws and her parents' paws. Morningkit was there, beneath the earth, and for now her family was with her.

For the first time since she was a kit and the voice in her head a playmate, Moonpaw tried to reach out.

You see? she thought, hoping that Morningkit could hear her. *You weren't here long, but you were loved. You still are.*

Chapter 22

Tawnypelt hesitated outside the medicine den, anxiously sheathing and unsheathing her claws. She wanted to spend time with Brambleclaw, she really did, but each time she went to the medicine den, her heart broke a little more. Even on his best days, Brambleclaw looked too thin and his eyes were fever-bright, but at least on those days he talked sensibly to her and seemed hopeful for the future. On his worst days, he didn't even wake, tossing and turning in a shallow, restless sleep and sometimes crying out in what sounded like pain or fear.

On those bad days, it hurt to see him, and she doubted if her presence there did Brambleclaw any good at all.

Steeling herself, she held her tail and her head high. She'd come here to help and comfort her brother in his illness, and she'd do her best, no matter what. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward, pushing her way through the screen of brambles, and entered the medicine den.

At first glance, everything seemed peaceful. Alderheart wasn't there, nor was little Moonpaw, to Tawnypelt's quiet relief. She wasn't going to complain about an apprentice, but something about Moonpaw made the fur rise on the back of her neck. She didn't like her hanging around Brambleclaw.

Jayfeather was making a mixture of herbs near the den entrance and waved his tail in greeting. Behind him, she could glimpse Brambleclaw's large tabby back. He was shifting uncomfortably in his nest, but she couldn't see if he was asleep or awake.

"Hi, Tawnypelt," Jayfeather mewed softly. At his words, Brambleclaw rolled over and squinted wearily at her. At least he was awake, but it didn't look like it was one of his better days, Tawnypelt thought apprehensively. His eyes were dull with tiredness and his pelt looked dry and brittle. He looked like he'd lost weight even just in the few days since she'd come to ThunderClan.

"Hi, Jayfeather," she answered the medicine cat, trying to keep her voice cheerful. "Hi, Brambleclaw. I thought I'd come and see you for a good chat. How are you feeling?"

Brambleclaw's voice was low and hoarse. "Better now that you're here."

Jayfeather got to his paws and nodded to Brambleclaw. "If you'll be all right with Tawnypelt for a little while, I could use some fresh air."

Brambleclaw sighed. "I'm not so far gone that I can't manage for a few breaths without you, Jayfeather. Go get yourself a mouse or something."

"All right, but yowl if you need me. I'll be just outside." With a flick of his tail, Jayfeather headed out of the medicine den, and Tawnypelt padded closer to her brother and sat down by his nest.

She looked him over. *He looks worse than ever.* He couldn't possibly have lost more weight overnight, could he? His ribs were clearly visible beneath his once-thick pelt. But his eyes were focused and full of what looked like relief at the sight of her.

"Tawnypelt," he breathed, and put out a paw to touch hers. "I'm so glad you're here. I have a message for you from StarClan."

That was the last thing Tawnypelt had expected to hear. "From *StarClan*?" Hadn't they already given her a message directly? What more could they have to say? And why would they go through poor Brambleclaw? Didn't he have enough to deal with?

Brambleclaw nodded, keeping his amber eyes fixed on hers. "Bluestar came to me in a dream. She said that you must heed StarClan's warning." He fixed her with a weary gaze. "What does it mean, Tawnypelt? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"I'm sorry," Tawnypelt told him and sighed. "I didn't want to burden you with it, but Bluestar came to me in a vision. She told me that a great peril was coming and that I would have to lead the Clans out of darkness. And I have been trying to tell every cat about it. But no one's been listening to me. After all the arguments I had with Tigerstar and the medicine cats, I was starting to wonder if I really did receive a prophecy or if they were right and I was just dreaming." The words were heavy in her mouth—it was hard to admit her doubt after insisting for so long that she was the one who knew the truth.

"**B**ut it was a real prophecy," Brambleclaw meowed. His eyes, which had seemed dull, were brightening feverishly, and he leaned toward her from his nest. "My knowing about it proves that, doesn't it?"

"It must." Tawnypelt felt dizzy. It was overwhelming to have another cat confirm the truth after so long.

"Bluestar told me that you were the one entrusted with the prophecy, the one who could do something. But you're running out of time." As if the moment of emphasis had drained his energy, Brambleclaw slumped back into his nest. Despite the seriousness of his words, Tawnypelt was distracted by a new twinge of worry: Surely Brambleclaw shouldn't become exhausted so easily. He was definitely getting worse.

He was still watching her intently despite his obvious weariness, and hurriedly she responded to his words. "Running out of time? For what? Is this about the Moonpool?"

Not for the first time, she wished fervently that StarClan could manage to be a little clearer in their orders. She wanted to do whatever they needed her to do, but how could she even know what that was? *A dark path,* she thought. *A two-faced cat.*

"Bluestar told me something else," Brambleclaw meowed. "She said that 'the eldest trees in the forest see what fresh seedlings cannot.'"

"She told me that, too," Tawnypelt confessed. "I've been thinking it over, and I wonder if she meant the Clan elders. They could be the eldest trees, couldn't they?"

Bramblestar nodded. "That makes sense to me."

Tawnypelt tucked her tail beneath her paws, thinking. The elders probably knew this territory better than any other cat and would remember their journeys to get here as well. If there was another Moonpool, or something like a Moonpool . . . well, those elders would have said something about it before now, but maybe there was something they didn't *know* they knew.

Or perhaps there was something the elders could advise her on that wasn't directly linked to the Moonpool. She thought again: *Beware the two-faced cat.*

I don't know *that's about Moonpaw!*

Still, the elders of ThunderClan would have had plenty of time to observe Moonpaw. With no official duties to distract them, elders were usually full of gossip and would spend a lot of time observing the other members of their Clans. And apprentices always hunted for the elders and helped care for them. If there was anything odd about Moonpaw, they would have noticed. Any elders in any Clan would notice a cat who was . . . different. And they'd probably be happy to tell her all about it, if she asked.

"I guess I should start talking to elders," she meowed. "Do you think it means the elders of all five Clans? They probably know all kinds of things, but no one listens to them, just like no cat has wanted to listen to what I've told them about the prophecy."

Bramblestar flicked his ears. The movement sent out a scent of sour sickness and the faint sweetness of an infected wound, and Tawnypelt's stomach twisted. "I'd guess all the Clans," he agreed. "And if no cat listens to the elders, then maybe you should start, instead of complaining that no one listens to you."

"Hey!" Tawnypelt bristled.

"Even great leaders can find themselves sent into the elders' den and silenced before they're ready," Brambleclaw reminded her.

Is he talking about himself? Tawnypelt shot what she hoped was a subtle look at her brother. She'd thought that it had been his choice to step down from ThunderClan's leadership, and it was hard to imagine Squirrelstar pushing him out, but what if she was wrong?

Brambleclaw caught her look and snorted. "Not me. My problem was getting ThunderClan to let me walk away. But there are other cats, other leaders, in the elders' den who might not want to be there."

Tawnypelt wondered if he meant Leafstar. She'd stepped down as leader not because she'd wanted to, but because enough of her Clan had demanded it. In the end she'd made the choice to give up leadership rather than taking the question to the other leaders to decide, but no cat thought it had been an easy decision.

"Leafstar's not in the elders' den yet, exactly," she meowed thoughtfully.

"It's not that simple," Brambleclaw replied. "From what Squirrelstar's told me, it sounds like no cat is quite sure who's leading SkyClan now. It's an awkward spot for both Leafstar and Hawkwing. But in any case, Bluestar wants you to gather the wisdom of the elders. That'll show you the way forward. She says you need to hurry. The elders won't be here forever, and eventually their wisdom will die with them."

Tawnypelt stared at him, stricken by his words. It wasn't a shock to hear that elders would die someday—but, right now, Brambleclaw seemed the elder closest to the verge of death.

I'*m not ready for that,* she thought. *Not at all.*

She swallowed hard and continued. "How do you think—" She was going to ask him what he thought the best approach would be to use in questioning the ThunderClan elders, but she broke off. Brambleclaw's face had changed. His eyes, which had been sharp

and focused on her, had drifted, his gaze now on a spot just past her right ear.

He was looking to her right so intently that she glanced behind herself, just in case some cat had arrived unnoticed, even though she knew she would have smelled or heard any intruder. There was no one there.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her fur bristling nervously at the nape of her neck.

Brambleclaw's face twisted in anger, a fierce expression Tawnypelt had rarely seen before. "You shouldn't be here," he snarled. "You don't belong in this world."

Tawnypelt recoiled. Was he talking to her? What did he mean? Her spine tingled uneasily—it was as if there was someone else in the den with them. But that wasn't true, there wasn't any cat here. He *must* be talking to her. "What does that mean?" she asked. "Do you want me to leave? You're the one who called me here!" She could hear her own voice rising.

With a quick patter of paws, Jayfeather ran back into the den, fur spiking on his back. "What do you think you're doing?" he snapped at her. "You're upsetting my patient!" Tawnypelt realized that Brambleclaw was breathing hard, still staring behind her. Jayfeather put a gentle paw on his side, trying to soothe him.

"I'm sorry," she meowed, abashed. "He was saying things that didn't make sense and staring off at nothing. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or not, but it scared me."

Jayfeather huffed. "Sometimes feverish cats see things that aren't there," he meowed sharply. "I'd expect a cat of your age to have come across that before."

"I guess you're right," Tawnypelt answered, her shoulders slumping. She felt a bit ridiculous when Jayfeather put it like that.

And yet . . . Brambleclaw had sounded so cold and angry. Not like himself at all.

The last time Brambleclaw had sounded so different from his usual even-tempered self, it had been because he hadn't been

Brambleclaw at all, but another cat hiding behind Brambleclaw's pelt. After he had lost a life in the snow, Ashfur had taken over his body and only pretended to be Brambleclaw.

A*shfur is dead.* Tawnypelt reassured herself, watching her brother closely. She knew that. Everyone knew that.

But what if, since it had happened once, it would now be easier for it to happen again? What if his time in the Dark Forest had made Brambleclaw more vulnerable to whatever evil spirits might be lurking there, just waiting for a chance to return to the living world?

Especially since every day he seemed closer to death himself. Did that open him up to dark influences? Tawnypelt itched with apprehension.

"Are you sure he's still Brambleclaw?" she asked warily.

"I don't have time for ridiculous questions," Jayfeather growled. "I'm going to give Brambleclaw some chamomile to help him rest. Perhaps you should *come back later*."

"I'm okay, Tawnypelt," Brambleclaw meowed. He sounded tired, but like himself again. "We'll talk tomorrow, okay? Remember what I told you."

"Sure," Tawnypelt meowed uneasily, glancing between her brother, whose gaze was solidly on her face once more rather than staring off behind her, and the angry medicine cat. "See you later."

She padded out of the medicine den, still feeling uneasy. Outside, ThunderClan's camp was busy, cats sharing tongues or coming and going from the clearing. No one noticed her as she stood close to the medicine den's entrance, watching them.

Brambleclaw's words were reassuring, she thought. There was *probably* no evil spirit inside him—and, as she thought over what he had said, it hadn't *sounded* like something had invaded his body, not really.

You don't belong in this world, he'd said. The more she thought about his words, the more it sounded like he'd been talking not to her, but to someone else. He'd been looking past her at the empty air.

Empty as far as Tawnypelt could see. Maybe Brambleclaw had seen someone there. She shivered a little at the thought, suddenly chilly. Were there dark spirits surrounding Brambleclaw that no other cat could see?

Or . . .

Maybe he was remembering someone who had been there earlier, reliving a past conversation. Brambleclaw was feverish after all, and Jayfeather had claimed he was delirious. Had his words been meant for another living cat, who Brambleclaw had briefly thought was in the medicine den with him?

Moonpaw. The young apprentice sprang immediately to mind. It seemed like she spent almost as much time in the medicine den as Alderheart and Jayfeather did. Could Brambleclaw have been reliving a conversation he'd had with the young cat with the divided face? What had he meant, that she didn't belong there? Just that she wasn't a medicine cat and should return to her own duties? Or something more sinister?

Tawnypelt's chest felt tight with worry. No matter how she tried to avoid thinking ill of the young cat, Moonpaw still seemed the most likely to be the two-faced cat with a paw in each world that the prophecy spoke of. That the prophecy had told her to beware. It wasn't just because of her odd face, although her looks made it easy to think of her as "two-faced." She didn't behave like other cats.

Should I tell Squirrelstar? Or maybe the ThunderClan medicine cats?

Tawnypelt breathed deeply to calm herself and considered the question. *No.*

She shook her head at the thought, the fur on her tail bushing. The memory of how her Clanmates in ThunderClan had treated her and Brambleclaw because of their father's betrayal still stung, even after all these seasons. It hadn't been her fault, or Brambleclaw's, that the first Tigerstar had tried to kill Bluestar. But they'd been blamed, so much so that Tawnypelt had decided she had to leave the Clan of her birth for good.

They might welcome her back as a visitor now, but she'd never forgotten their rejection.

She wasn't going to poison ThunderClan against Moonpaw, not unless she had some solid proof of her suspicions. And the fact that Moonpaw looked different, and acted oddly, wasn't proof of anything.

After all, maybe Jayfeather was right and Brambleclaw had simply been delirious with fever and the exhaustion of an intense conversation.

But he'd seemed completely present before that, when he'd told her to talk to the elders, that she was running out of time.

That was what she had to focus on. Anything else would have to wait.

I need to talk to the elders.

Chapter 23

Starlingpaw opened his mouth and scented the late morning air, letting the mountain breezes roll over his tongue. He felt happy. Even though leaf-bare was closer than ever, today was warmer than it had been, and he could smell fresh water and the rich odor of dying leaves. Beneath all that was the mouthwatering scent of prey: mice, voles, shrews, and squirrels. Hunting had been lean and difficult higher on the mountain, but as they got lower and the slopes got less bare, it was clear there would be more to catch.

Starlingpaw's stomach rumbled at the idea. *We'll stop to hunt soon, I bet.*

It was almost like early leaf-fall again now, not the beginning of leaf-bare, despite the chill of the stone beneath his paws. He could remember, back in greenleaf, when he'd been very small, there'd been a day when it had suddenly been much colder for no reason, and the cats around him had shivered and meowed, "Feels like the beginning of newleaf again!"

Kitescratch had purred with laughter when Starlingpaw, puzzled, asked him if it could really be newleaf, and told him the seasons were less orderly than most cats believed—you always got a day or two of newleaf again near the end of greenleaf, or a few days of greenleaf's hot weather before leaf-fall ended.

"Those are great days for hunting," he'd told Starlingpaw. "Prey is lively because they're so surprised by the weather." Starlingpaw remembered that now, when the foothills of the mountain seemed alive with prey in the suddenly warm air.

As a kit, Starlingpaw had been sure his father, so big and strong, had known everything. The memory of that conversation about the weather hurt less than most of his memories of Kitescratch.

Maybe someday none of the memories will hurt.

Except for the last memory, of Kitescratch's horrified face as the badger ripped him apart after Starlingpaw's foolishness distracted him. That one would never stop hurting.

Starlingpaw tried to push the thought away and concentrated on the warmth of the sun and the satisfaction of walking these lower slopes of the mountain—there were still boulders here and there, and long stretches of gray stone, but there were also sturdy trees and swaths of brownish leaf-fall grass, and the path the cats followed was wider. They weren't scrambling over boulders anymore and sometimes could even walk side by side instead of in single file.

It won't be too long before we're off the mountain and on our way home, he thought. And they were bringing good news. All the Clans would be glad to see them and to hear what Feathertail had told Crowfeather. It was reassuring to know that StarClan hadn't lost sight of them.

Kitescratch is there, watching over us, too. I hope he's not angry with me. Starlingpaw pulled his tail closer to his body, his paws prickling nervously. *Of course he's not angry.*

"How is your leg feeling, Starlingpaw?" Fidgetflake's voice startled him, and he gave an embarrassing little squeak of surprise. He'd been thinking so hard he hadn't noticed the medicine cat coming down the trail.

"My leg?" Startled, Starlingpaw realized his leg hadn't been bothering him at all that morning. He hadn't even thought about yesterday's injury. "It feels fine, actually."

He wiggled his leg and, now that he was concentrating, felt the slightest twinge of soreness. But it was barely noticeable, nothing like yesterday's pain.

"Good, I'm glad to hear it," Fidgetflake meowed briskly. He peered at Starlingpaw's leg and nodded. "Yes, those scrapes are healing nicely."

"You're a really good medicine cat," Starlingpaw told him sincerely. "Thank you."

Fidgetflake looked touched. "You're welcome," he meowed, and brushed his tail across Starlingpaw's shoulders affectionately. "That's good to hear. I'd better see how everyone else is doing, too." He headed down the path toward Nectarsong, waving his tail.

Starlingpaw watched the cheerful black-and-white tom as he spoke briefly to Nectarsong, clearly checking to make sure that she, too, was doing well on this stage of the journey. *Fidgetflake is so kind,* he thought. *He just wants to take care of his Clanmates.*

He felt guilty that he had ever thought Fidgetflake might be the two-faced cat that StarClan and Tawnypelt had said he should beware.

Feather was right, he thought. *It was disloyal of me to suspect him. My duty is to concentrate on being the best SkyClan cat I can be. I should forget everything else. If StarClan needs me, they'll let me know.*

As he walked, he began to think about the choices he could make to be a better Clanmate and a better apprentice.

He didn't always concentrate on what Nectarsong was teaching him, he thought guiltily, and in fact—when he'd been trying to spend time near Tawnypelt in the medicine den—he had sometimes even tried to dodge and hide from her when she was looking for him.

I'll focus on learning everything I can from her from now on. I'll be an obedient apprentice. And that'll help me be the best SkyClan warrior someday. Maybe if I work hard, I can be deputy one day, or even leader. The idea was exciting.

He'd been avoiding Needleclaw and Robinpaw, afraid of his mother's and sister's grief over Kitescratch's death. Afraid, too, that they might realize he was the one most responsible for that death

and that their grief would turn to anger. He wasn't sure he could bear that. But they had the right to be angry if they thought he deserved it, and maybe they'd forgive him. His heart ached at the thought. He'd missed them. He'd be a better Clanmate if he let them take their anger out on him, or grieve with him, whatever they wanted.

I'll spend time with my kin again.

What else? He thought hard as he padded along the winding path with the other cats. They'd come out from beneath the twisted mountain trees now and into a long swath of grassy land beneath the open sky.

He could do more for Cherrytail, Sparrowpelt, and Fallowfern. Apprentices were supposed to hunt for their Clan's elders, help groom their fur, and change their bedding. Starlingpaw did what he was instructed to do, but he didn't usually think about the elders unless Nectarsong told him to take over a piece of fresh-kill or put fresh moss in their nests. Robinpaw probably did more than he did. And the elders were all really nice. They deserved to have an apprentice go above and beyond what was required. A better Clanmate would be aware of what the elders needed.

From now on, he thought, *I will—*

A shadow darkened the path, blocking the sun, and he looked up, squinting. After a moment, he spotted a large bird overhead, circling lower and lower.

Starlingpaw had never seen such a big bird fly so low. He stared, confused.

"Eagle! Run! *Scatter!*" Ivypool yowled, and suddenly the other cats were running in all directions. Starlingpaw froze, terrified. It was all happening again. Just like with the badger that had killed Kitescratch, they were under attack and he didn't know what to do.

"Starlingpaw!" Nectarsong was charging straight at him. "We have to get under cover!" She ran into him, shoving him along for several steps before he was able to jerk into motion and run with her, his paws pounding faster against the rock of the trail as his body remembered how to move.

His lungs were burning and his heart was hammering so loudly his ears throbbed.

Where is the eagle? He was sure that at any moment sharp talons would rip through his pelt and pull him into the air.

A harsh screech sounded overhead and, despite himself, Starlingpaw felt his paws slow and he looked up. His pelt ached with terror, waiting for an attack.

The eagle was diving, just as he'd feared, its long, terrifying claws stretched out to grab, to tear at a soft pelt, but it wasn't diving toward Starlingpaw. Farther down the mountain, Hootwhisker was running so hard that his body was stretched out in one long, muscular line. He wasn't too far from some thorny bushes that might provide shelter: Crowfeather and Shadowsight were already beneath them, yowling desperate encouragement. But Starlingpaw saw, with a sinking heart, that the WindClan warrior wasn't going to escape.

The eagle was too close and too fast, swooping down upon Hootwhisker with a fierce shriek. Time seemed to freeze and Starlingpaw's breath caught in his throat.

It's all happening again.

Hootwhisker's dark gray coat seemed to Starlingpaw to shift to the reddish-brown Kitescratch's had been, and he knew that he was about to see another cat be torn apart and, once again, be unable to help.

Then, with a yowl of fury, Crowfeather dashed from beneath the bushes and leaped into the air, catching the eagle's wing in his claws as he began to fall. The huge bird lurched in midair, giving a startled, angry screech. Crowfeather was falling, but he was dragging the eagle's wing with him.

"Hootwhisker! *Run!*" Shadowsight yowled. The WindClan warrior, who had been staring, awestruck, at the battle above him, shook himself and dashed beneath the bushes.

We have to help him. Crowfeather can't do this alone.

Heart pounding, Starlingpaw staggered a few tail-lengths down the path toward the struggling cat and eagle. Crowfeather's weight was dragging the eagle lower, but he was still well out of paw's reach. Below, Shadowsight, Hootwhisker, Ivypool, and Duskfur had

emerged from the shelter of the thornbushes and were circling below them, looking up with wide, panicked eyes. Fidgetflake was at the base of a boulder, staring up, his mouth open in shock. Starlingpaw and Nectarsong came down the trail to stand shoulder to shoulder beside him, Nectarsong's fur stiff with fear.

The eagle's powerful wings beat hard, trying to throw Crowfeather off, but the WindClan deputy hung on grimly, his hind legs kicking at the bird's body as if hoping to rip open its belly, his teeth and front claws firmly digging into the wing. The eagle struck at him with its beak, and red blood began to swell from a wound in the cat's shoulder.

For a few breaths, as the eagle lurched in the sky, it looked like Crowfeather would pull it to the ground. *The Tribe* hunts *eagles,* Starlingpaw remembered. *It must be possible.*

But they didn't hunt them alone—Rain had told him how a whole patrol would bring down an eagle, leaping on its back and pinning its wings to the mountain stone as it fell beneath their combined weight. Fierce as he was, Crowfeather was simply not strong or heavy enough.

With a few more beats of its wings, the eagle, looking battered, righted itself and began to rise, despite the cat dangling below it. Starlingpaw's chest felt hollow with fear.

"Crowfeather!" he screeched. "Let go!"

The other cats joined in with his cry, running after the bird as it headed away from them. Crowfeather was still clinging to it—maybe afraid to drop, maybe still thinking he could bring down the eagle. Starlingpaw caught a glimpse of the WindClan deputy's face, his eyes narrowed and his ears flat with furious determination.

Starlingpaw's paws pounded against the ground as he raced beside the others, but the eagle's flight was faster than they could run. The great bird, flapping its wings unevenly, flew away, getting farther and farther from them until it was just a silhouette against the blue sky.

And then, with a frightened yowl, Crowfeather dropped to earth. It seemed like he fell forever, a dark shape descending lower and lower. There was a faint thud as he hit the rocks, then silence.

Chapter 24

Thick gray clouds were rolling in across the lake, bringing rain toward ThunderClan's camp. Moonpaw looked nervously at the sky. She could tell the sun had risen, because there was daylight illuminating the camp, but the sun itself was hidden behind the clouds.

I should stay here.

The apprentices' den was warm and dry, but she didn't want to wait another day to tell Morningkit what she'd learned. Moonpaw still wasn't sure how much of her life Morningkit knew about, and whether she was paying attention when she wasn't speaking in Moonpaw's mind. But she wanted to make sure she shared her parents' memories with her littermate. She'd spent the rest of the day yesterday with Bayshine and Thriftear, curling together and talking quietly. They'd reminisced over Moonpaw's kithood, and her parents had come up with a few more small facts about Morningkit's brief life. She'd kicked out with her short back legs when she struggled to breathe, they'd told her.

"I joked then that she'd swim like a RiverClan cat when she grew up," Bayshine meowed, his eyes glittering with both remembered humor and sorrow. "We wanted so much for her to get to grow up."

It had been a good day, despite some of it being sad. Moonpaw felt filled up with and protected by her parents' love.

Now it was time to share that with Morningkit, even though it looked like a bad storm was coming. A cold breeze, smelling of rain, blew through the den entrance, and Moonpaw shivered. But, stiffening her spine with determination, she climbed out of her nest and headed outside.

"Where are you going?" Shinepaw's head stuck up above the edge of her nest, her green eyes sharp with curiosity.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Moonpaw meowed apologetically. She really hadn't wanted either of her denmates to notice she was gone at all. "Go back to sleep, it's early."

Shinepaw eyed her. "Where are *you* going?" she asked again, more sharply.

"Just to the dirtplace." Moonpaw tried to sound like she wasn't lying. She glanced at Goldenpaw's nest, hoping he wasn't going to wake up, too. He seemed fast asleep, luckily, his golden back turned toward them. He always slept more deeply than either of his denmates. "I might go by the medicine den, too, so don't worry if I'm not back for a while."

Shinepaw wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, I hate going in there. It smells like medicine."

Moonpaw shrugged. She liked the way the medicine den smelled, its pleasantly sharp scent of herbs and the individual scents of the medicine cats. "Go back to sleep," she meowed again, making her voice soft and soothing.

She slipped out of the den before Shinepaw could ask her anything else. At least the other apprentices wouldn't be likely to come looking for her if they got up before Moonpaw was back in camp, not if they thought she was in the medicine den. They were both afraid of Jayfeather, although Moonpaw didn't really understand why.

Shinepaw's so nosy, the orange cat whispered in her mind. So she was present now. *Don't you get tired of sharing the apprentices' den with her and Goldenpaw?*

It's fine, Moonpaw thought. *They're my friends.* She heard an irritated huff at the back of her mind, but Morningkit didn't answer.

The dawn patrol was gathering near the tunnel out of camp, their fur fluffed against the damp mist in the air. Moonpaw slid behind the dens, heading for the dirtplace tunnel. She wanted to have this conversation in private. With luck, no one would spot her while she was out of camp. She wasn't doing anything wrong, but she wanted to be alone, and she didn't want to answer any questions.

Slipping out of camp, she skirted around the dirtplace and padded between oak trees, heading for the lakeshore. As she walked, the mist in the air grew heavier, turning into first a soft patter of rain, then a steady one. Moonpaw shivered as water seeped through her fur, soaking her to the skin.

On her way, she tried to think of what she could tell Morningkit, her *sister*.

You'd be better off in StarClan, she thought. *And all the cats who love you here will come to you there one day. I'll come to you.*

Will that be enough for her? she wondered. *She* has *to go away.*

The lakeshore was deserted. The wind was whipping the lake into white-capped waves in its center, and as Moonpaw got closer, she saw raindrops dimpling its surface. Shivering, she bent to look at her own reflection in the water.

Despite the ripples and raindrops, she saw herself clearly, looking half drowned, her fur limp and the difference in fur color on the two sides of her face more defined than ever. And, glancing over her shoulder just as she'd hoped, she saw Morningkit's orange face. Her littermate was right behind her.

You want to talk to me? Morningkit meowed, looking surprised. *You've been driving me away and ignoring me, except when you're sleeping. You can't stop me then.* Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. *Does this have something to do with your protector? Is he going to try to drive me away?*

"My protector?" Moonpaw echoed, puzzled. "Do you mean Brambleclaw?"

Yes! The orange cat's tail lashed with annoyance. *He's old and he's sick, but in dreams he's strong enough to get rid of me. It's not fair.*

I have a right to be there.

"I'm sorry you feel left out. I don't want to make you feel bad," Moonpaw meowed carefully. "Brambleclaw's not with me. I came alone because I wanted to tell you something."

What do you mean? The orange cat came even closer. In the reflection, her face was so close to Moonpaw's that Moonpaw almost expected to feel warm breath on her cheek. But there was nothing, not even a brush of fur against hers.

She took a deep breath before she began. She'd thought about this, about how to start, but it was harder now that Morningkit was right there, her green eyes meeting Moonpaw's mismatched ones in their reflection.

"I know where you're buried," she began, and Morningkit's eyes widened in surprise. "I spent most of the day there yesterday, with our parents."

I don't understand. Why? The orange cat seemed suspicious still, her gaze searching Moonpaw's face.

"I asked our parents—Thriftear and Bayshine—to tell me about you. They told me all about how happy they were when Thriftear was pregnant with us, and how we were born. You were sickly, and they tried so hard to save you. When you died, the elders of the Clan buried you in the prettiest place they could find, and our parents went there every day so they could feel close to you." Moonpaw stared earnestly into her sister's face, willing her to understand.

In their reflection, Morningkit backed away a few steps, still visible but no longer right by Moonpaw's side. *Why are you telling me this?*

"Your name is Morningkit," Moonpaw meowed, and Morningkit blinked.

"Your name is Morningkit," she meowed again, stronger, "and it's time for you to go home to StarClan. You'll never be lonely there. You'll have other kits to play with, and older cats watching over you. You'll have prey to hunt. Nothing there can hurt you. You'll be happy."

Morningkit watched Moonpaw silently, her face blank. Moonpaw desperately wanted to know what she was thinking.

"Later," she went on, "after my life here is over, I'll come and be with you there. And so will our parents."

Part of Moonpaw had thought that once she told Morningkit her name, and how much she had been loved, she would dissolve in a shimmer of joyful stars, and her spirit would *whoosh* away to StarClan's eternal hunting grounds.

But Morningkit looked, if anything, more solid than ever in their reflections. She stepped up close beside Moonpaw again. It was raining harder, and both their reflections wavered, raindrops distorting them into fractured versions of themselves.

I don't want to go to StarClan, her voice hissed in Moonpaw's mind. *I don't care how good you try to make it sound. I'd be alone there. I don't* know *those other cats.*

"It would be fine," Moonpaw reassured her. "You'd make friends. Eventually all good cats go there. You wouldn't be alone."

Morningkit glared at her accusingly. *When I'm not talking to you, I'm wandering as a spirit alone. And I hate it. You want me to be alone forever. Talk, talk, talk, but you just want me to go away.*

Moonpaw's pelt prickled with guilt. "That's not true."

Fur rising, Morningkit growled, her sharp teeth showing. *Bad enough that you stole my life,* she hissed in Moonpaw's head. *You got to live and I didn't. You* owe *me!*

Lightning flashed across the sky, followed immediately by an ominous crash of thunder. For a moment, Morningkit's eyes glowed, reflecting the lightning on the water. She looked furious and unreal, something out of a nightmare. And she raised a paw over Moonpaw's head, then tore her claws down across her back.

"Ouch!" Moonpaw cried, startled by the pain. She jumped and whirled around, feeling blood on her pelt. Had Morningkit just *hurt* her? How?

She glanced back at the water, but the orange cat was gone.

Moonpaw backed away, thunder ringing in her ears, then turned and dashed back toward ThunderClan's camp, her heart pounding.

She was afraid that, just like in her dream, she would hear paws racing after her.

And Morningkit could hurt her. She needed protection. She needed a full-grown warrior who understood everything.

Moonpaw really hoped that Brambleclaw was awake, because she needed him now.

About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Warriors, Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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